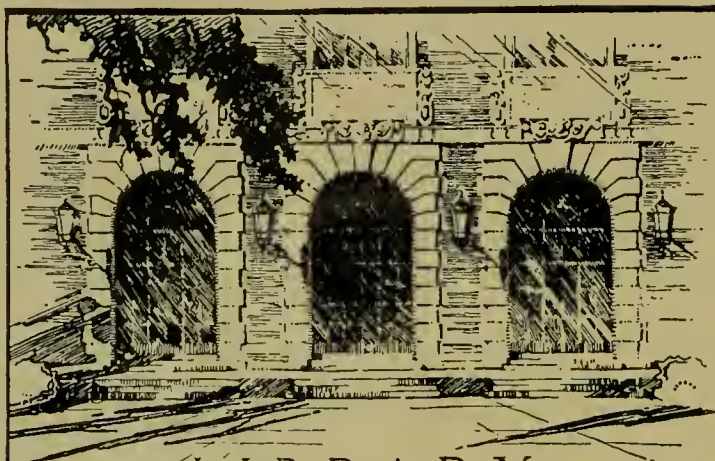


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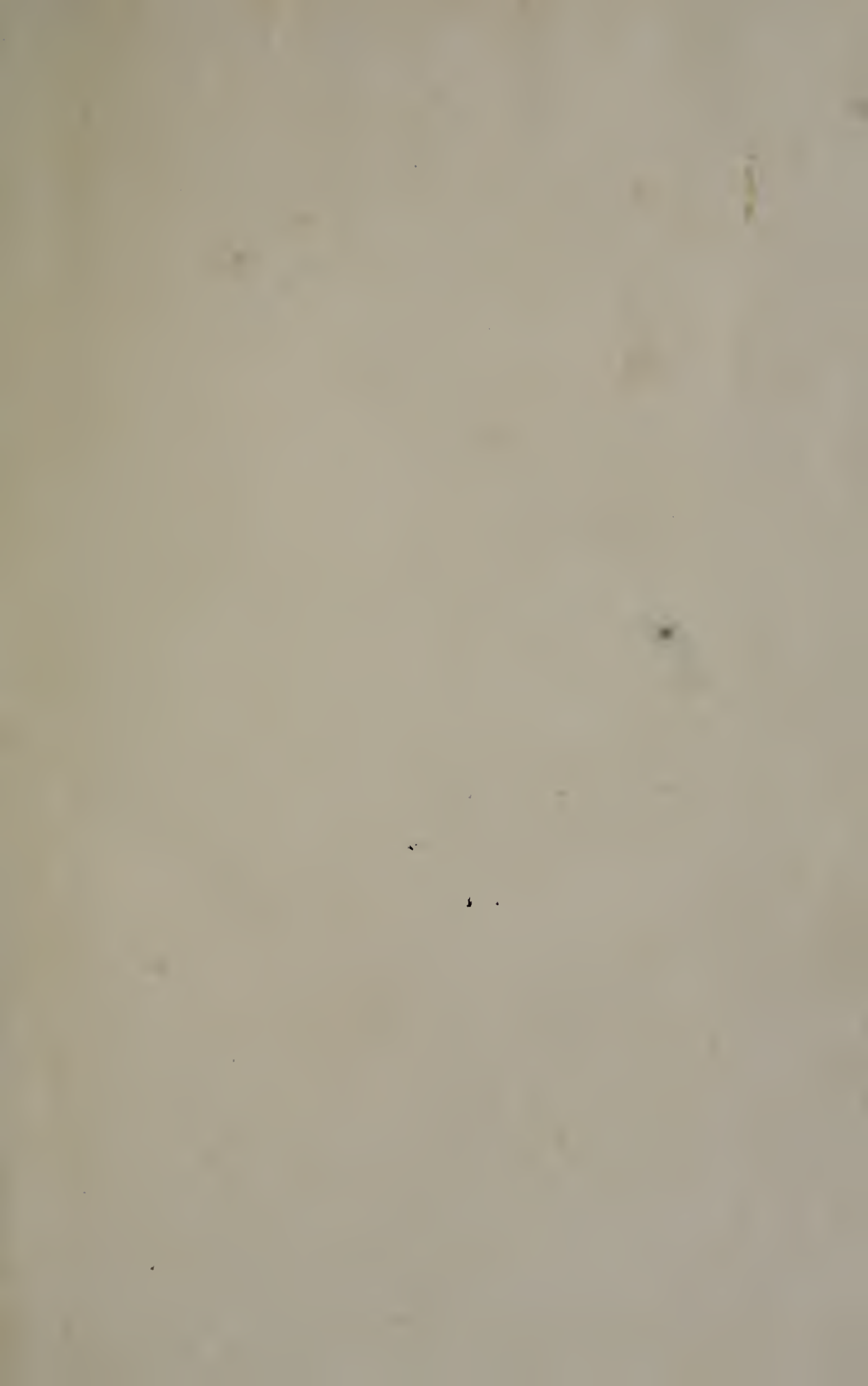


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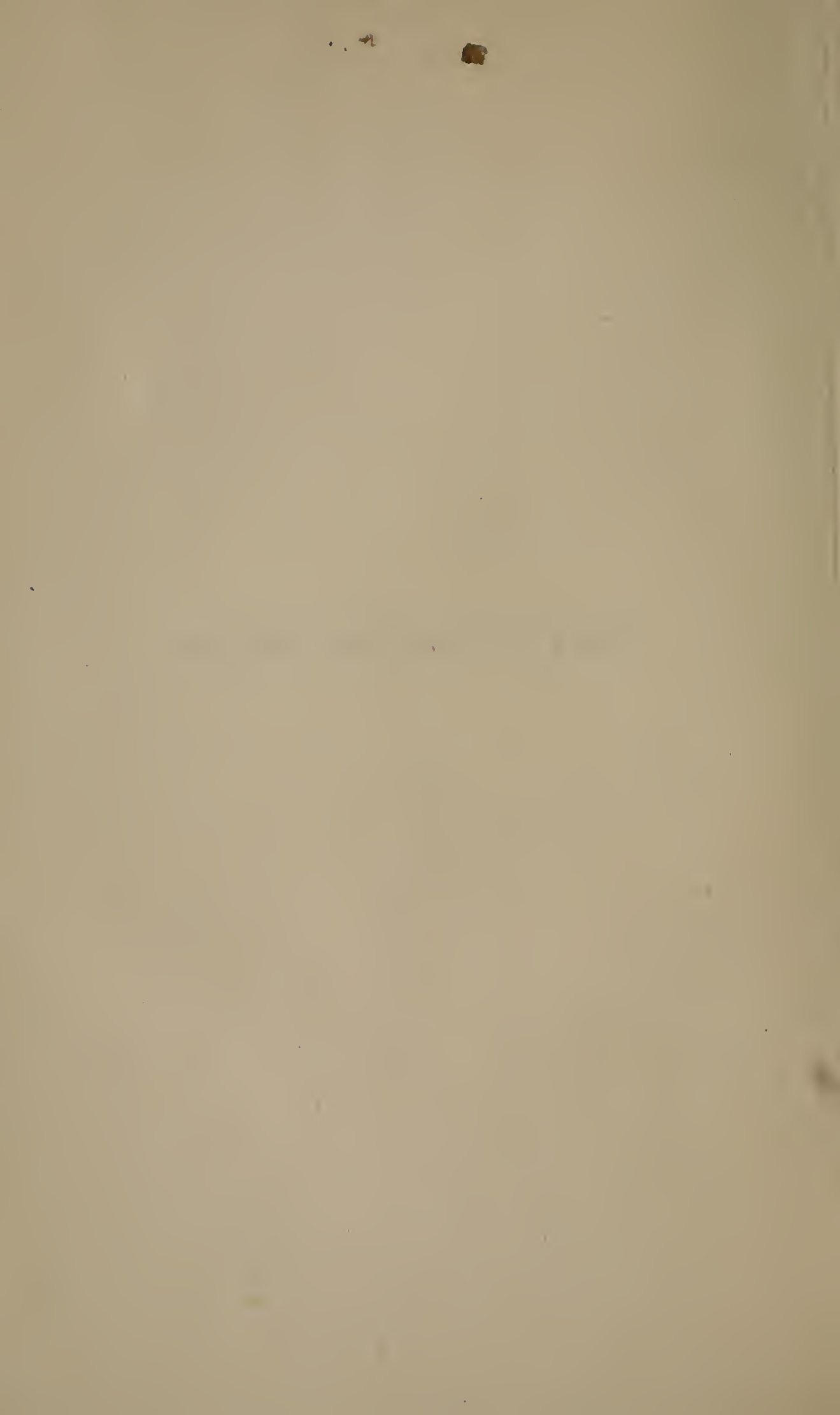
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GRANTHAM SECRETS.



L. Horneby 1875.

GRANTHAM SECRETS.

A Novel.

BY

PHŒBE M. FEILDEN.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



London:

SAMUEL TINSLEY,

10, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.

1875.

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GRANTHAM SECRETS.

CHAPTER I.

169156 *Sketch*
“WHAT a glorious moon! Oh, mother, what a night! I wish we might walk on for ever, instead of having to stop short at Grantham Hall!”

So cried Margaret Willoughby, as she opened the side-door of a pleasant house which went by the name of “The Cottage,” and followed her mother out into the delicious August air.

For a moment the two stood gazing, as though spell-bound by the beauty of the scene which they had so frequently gazed at before. Then turning a little to their left, they bent their steps across a soft sloping lawn towards a piece of, rougher

ground which took to a path winding through a small wood, the ups and downs of which led the way to a little wicket gate opening upon the private property of Sir John Grantham, the lord of the manor.

“How wonderful it looks!” said Margaret, stopping, soon after they had reached the wood, to feast her eyes and her fancy on shadowy corners, which appeared to be endless in their mysterious depths, and on rich moonbeams which, as they fell amidst the shade, lit up here and there a fern, a flower, or a moss-grown stone, and seemed to be revealing a thousand treasures which had been kept secret during the sunshine of day. In short, the pretty spot had been transformed for Margaret into a land of marvellous enchantment. And, may be, her fancies might have remained entranced by it till cock-crow, but for the necessity of obeying her mother’s impatient call.

“My child, we shall be very late. Do you mean to stay dreaming here all night?”

“It seems a sin to leave the wood for a tiresome house,” replied Margaret, half to

herself, "It never looked so lovely, or gave me such a strange feeling before. I feel as if something wonderful must be going to happen."

"I know what is about to happen," returned her mother. "We are going to receive a scolding from Lady Grantham for being fashionable, and to find that the dancing has begun, and that you have lost all chance of partners!"

"I am not much afraid, mother. Mr. Meredith will of course be there, and may perhaps have kept a dance or two for me," said Margaret, with a careless laugh; adding, with a shrug of her shoulders, and a grimace expressive of mingled amusement and disgust, "and that Miles Grantham, too! I suppose he will allow me the great honour and delight of dancing with him occasionally. But I must make Mr. Meredith save me from this, if I can."

"My dear!" began Mrs. Willoughby.

"Well, mamma, you must agree with me in thinking Miles Grantham hateful! He always seems to me like a wicked sprite in a

German fairy-tale," put in Margaret, hastily. And then, while her mother continued her expostulations, her quick fancy peopled an imaginary world with ideal beings, who, although not fairies, were certainly utterly unlike any actual creatures of flesh and blood with whose characters she had as yet become acquainted. This fanciful world, in which it was the wont of her imagination to take frequent refuge, just now harmonized well with the charm and beauty of the soft moonlit evening; and her ideal friends seemed unusually living, and unusually full of interest, as she compared them with the "commonplace" people whom she was about to meet at Grantham Hall. Above all, the chief hero of her imagination,—he who took the most prominent place in the pictures painted by her brain, he who was the principal mover in the scenes of action that her fancy had created,—appeared to-night to have been inspired with new virtues, and to have been endowed with more extraordinary powers! It was impossible that she could ever meet his like on earth,

she thought!—one who was at once so self-sacrificing, so manly, so true, so skilful, and at the same time so fascinating, so nobly beautiful, so humorous, so capable of entering into all moods, whether grave or gay! But, although this was impossible, apparently it was none the less fair and just that Margaret's acquaintances should bear the penalty of her contempt and displeasure because they were so far from approaching the likeness of her own lofty ideal.

With this ideal moving before her mind's eye, amidst the many glowing fancies that made her inner life delightful, Margaret accompanied her mother into the large drawing-room of Grantham Hall. The other guests had already assembled. The party was not large. It was one of those informal meetings for dancing and music, round games and friendly conversation, for which the hospitable inhabitants of Grantham Hall were famous. These parties were usually got up suddenly. The neighbours were asked in an *impromptu* manner to spend the evening at the Hall. No one

felt obliged to accept the invitation merely because he had no previous engagement. But few who had ever attended a "Grantham evening," as it was termed in the neighbourhood, were disposed to disregard the chance of attending another. And sad-hearted, indeed, must that young person have been who failed to enjoy it when it came. For certainly the host and hostess had the art of infusing their own genial spirit into the minds of their guests. All were made to feel at their ease; and everything went brightly and pleasantly during the two or three hours that the entertainment lasted. Nor was any one happier on an occasion of the sort than Margaret Willoughby, who, despite the superiority of her own waking dream-land, found outer life at Grantham Hall exceedingly agreeable. Of course the commonplace and uninteresting people whom she met there could not be of any great consequence to one who was accustomed to hold intercourse with a far nobler race of beings, of her own creation; but nevertheless it could not be

otherwise than satisfactory to find herself welcomed so heartily, and looked upon as so necessary an element in other people's enjoyment. She was fuller of fun and merriment than any of the other girls; and her arrival at the present moment was hailed with delight by all.

"Here they are at last!" exclaimed Lady Grantham, as she shook hands with Mrs. Willoughby, and then turned an involuntarily admiring glance on her daughter's radiant face.

Margaret was generally considered rather to be winning, graceful, and picturesque than actually pretty, but there was something about her as she entered now that made those who looked at her say to themselves, "How beautiful! She is absolutely beautiful!"

In truth, her countenance had been transfigured into unwonted beauty by the brightness of the thoughts and fancies that were working within her mind. She was little aware, however, of the effect she was producing while she passed quickly through

the room, and, joining a group of acquaintances, charmed them all by her simple and natural manner, and her ready sympathy with them in all they had to tell of their doings and concerns.

“You will give me a dance?” suddenly whispered some one close behind her, in a tone as low, mysterious, and tender as though the request he was making had been one of a somewhat more important nature.

A shade of annoyance crossed Margaret’s face, but turning quickly round,—

“How do you do, Miles?” she said, in a cheerful, abrupt, and unconcerned manner.

“I did not see you. I beg your pardon! Were you saying something to me?”

“You did not see me! You did not know that I was near!” with a softly reproachful intonation in his accents, returned Miles Grantham.

“Of course I did not know that you were near when I did *not* see you. How should I?” said Margaret, in a voice that was less gentle and sweet than usual.

Miles’ answer was a sigh, but he added,

with lips that seemed to be tremulous from emotion,—

“You will not surely refuse me a dance?”

“Why should I refuse you a dance?” replied Margaret, with an impatient laugh. “Of course it would be the death of you if I did! But, luckily for you, bare civility forbids me to be your murderer. I have no engagement, and shall be happy to dance with you as soon as you have fulfilled all yours.”

“Mine! Ah, you remind me of my duty! You remind me of that stern taskmaster, my duty!” And once more heaving a sigh, Miles glanced in the direction of a group of young ladies who were waiting impatiently for the music of the next waltz to strike up.

Margaret’s eyes danced with merriment, while a pensive-looking young lady, who had caught Mr. Grantham’s glance, blushed, lowered her eyelids, and thought to herself, “Yes, I am sure I cannot be mistaken! That look—those tones—must surely mean something! But of course he cannot help

himself: of course he must pay attentions to others besides me! He is not one to let his own feelings interfere with his duty!"

Some one sat down to the piano and began to play a waltz, but still Miles Grantham lingered by Margaret's side.

"Your partner is waiting for you. You must 'go where duty calls you,' you know!" returned Margaret, mischievously.

"And you?" he said, in a tone of despondency, as he prepared at length to leave her.

"And *I* may possibly contrive to exist for a short time without you!" answered Margaret. Then murmuring to herself an ejaculation of thanksgiving at his departure, she retreated into a corner of the bay, and sat down by the open window. "I wonder if he fancies that I don't know that he speaks in the same sweet tone (as *they* may consider it!) to every other girl in the place!" she mused, while with contemptuous amusement she watched Miles Grantham's tall, stooping, narrow-chested figure make its way to the side of his expectant partner, and ob-

served how she raised confiding eyes to his dark sallow face, and returned his insinuating smile with one of grateful contentment. "Is it possible that the being lives on earth who finds herself able to worship *that* thing? Better be one of the 'poor ignorant heathen' at once, for their idols have at least the virtue of being dumb!"

After this fashion Margaret continued her musings, expressing to herself the sentiments and opinions in which she was almost singular. For with the ladies of the neighbourhood, generally, Miles Grantham had contrived to make himself popular. The mothers thought him an agreeable and exemplary young man. To the young ladies he was a hero of romance, possessed of every virtue under the sun. In their eyes the long features (which really were not ill-formed) appeared extraordinarily handsome. In the contracted brow they could see nothing amiss. And the fact that he was possessed by an apparent inability to look anyone steadily in the face only made him seem the more interesting; for to each one

the self-conscious droop of his eyelids seemed full of a thousand tender meanings, which only the fear of giving offence to her prevented his expressing in direct looks and words. One of these furtive, hurried glances of his, spoke volumes to the fertile imaginations of his young lady friends. And even the men of his acquaintance usually declared to themselves, after a time, that the heir of Grantham had "something in him," after all, and was "less of a muff" than they had fancied.

Can it have been that a too great familiarity had bred contempt in Margaret's mind? This is so far possible that Margaret and Miles had been playfellows in their childhood. All her life long, ever since the days when the big effeminate boy had lorded it over the little child whom he had been ordered to amuse, Margaret had been bored by Miles' show of affection, annoyed by his exigence and tyranny, and disgusted by his petty, mean, and cunning ways, his intense self-importance and offensive egoism. In their youthful quarrels her mother had

always told her that she, not the boy, who was so much older than herself, was the one to blame. And the only person from whom she had obtained, in those days, relief from her sense of injustice was Sir John Grantham, whose dislike towards his nephew and heir, though struggled against and kept locked up a secret in his own bosom, was almost equal to her own.

On one point, however, at all events, Margaret wronged her old playfellow. It is true that it was his glorious aim to make each young lady in the neighbourhood of Grantham believe that he was in love with her, and with her alone. But it is no less certain that it was his earnest intention to make Margaret Willoughby the future mistress of Grantham Hall. Nor, in his vain self-confidence, did he dream of resistance, on her part, to his sovereign will and pleasure.

“Poor Alice Craycroft! He shall marry her, as certainly as he was made to keep the daffodil he had chosen, when he cunningly tried to exchange it for my lily of the valley,

in the days of our childish fights. Dear old Nurse Gilling came to the rescue then. How well I remember her look! I can see her now, and hear her, giving it to Miles, and saying it was a shame of a great big boy like that, "what called himself a young gentleman," trying to cheat a little young lady like Miss Margaret out of her flower! Yes, he shall marry Alice to a certainty. Only, poor dear Alice, will she continue to be blinded, and to dream that her ape is a god?"

Thus Margaret continued her musings, while she clenched her little white hands together, and looked with a determined air in the direction of Miles and his pensive partner, who were spinning round to the music of the Elfin Waltzes.

But her musings and her determined thoughts were speedily interrupted. The sound of footsteps approaching the window from without made her turn her head to see the youthful and yet manly figure of Charles Meredith, who, hastening up to her, greeted her in a voice of frank gladness.

There was nothing remarkable or hero-like in his appearance; he was simply exceedingly nice-looking, with a broad well-formed brow, truth-telling dark eyes, and a pleasant straightforward expression of countenance.

“How long have you been here, Miss Willoughby?” he said. “I have been looking for you. How did I manage to miss you?”

“We came through the wood, and then took the short cut to the avenue; mamma was afraid we were late.”

“You are,—very late. Shall we have this waltz?”

“With pleasure.”

“Have you many engagements? I have none. Can you spare me some more dances?”

“I am engaged for a waltz with Mr. Grantham.”

“But not the next? Oh, it seems this is to be a quadrille on the lawn. Shall we dance it?”

So they danced and promenaded on the lawn, and even waltzed again, without being

disturbed by Miles Grantham. The music was good. They both danced well, and seemed to have been made to fit into each other's movements. They talked and laughed together between whiles. And Margaret was completely and carelessly gay and happy.

CHAPTER II.

AND CHARLES? Was his happiness equally light and equally devoid of care? Were there no hidden depths of love in his heart, mingling with the throbbings of a mighty fear, which made it both joy and agony inexpressible to him to be by her side—which made her sweet unconscious merri-ment at once a pain and a pleasure which something told him he must shortly lose? For she was unconscious, unconscious of anything beyond the pleasant sense of being liked in a friendly, hearty, and genial manner.

Four or five weeks had passed since Charles had settled himself down in the neighbourhood for the ostensible purpose of reading hard for his Oxford degree. Mr. Meredith was particularly anxious that

his son should try for honours. And Charles, who possessed little or no personal ambition, and who hated close study, —except in connection with any subject in which his eager mind happened for the time being to be feeling peculiar interest, —was nevertheless determined to gratify his father; and, with this object in view, he had taken up his position in a retired country spot, in a small cottage close to a good trout stream. With the superstition of his kind, he had looked to much assistance in his studies from the companionship of the neighbouring fish. But he had expected no other diversion and no other companionship than that which they afforded him. Alas, for his good intentions! He had fallen in with an Oxford acquaintance, had been introduced to Sir John Grantham, and had become a victim to the hospitality and dissipation of a very pleasant neighbourhood. And the trout-stream, his books, his thoughts, his dreams, all now were haunted by a girl's small piquant face, and especially by its

great changeful hazel eyes, which to him seemed the sweetest eyes that had ever opened upon sky and earth. The waters of his life which had hitherto flowed on in a calm and even course had at length been troubled to their depths, and in the troubling had gained for him a higher and a dearer value. Of all this, however, Margaret had as yet learnt nothing. How was she to gather anything of it from the frank and buoyant, or simply grave, almost matter-of-fact manner in which he discussed with her all kinds of subjects connected with earth and heaven? He had spoken to her no word of love, and was not one of those who by dint of tones and looks, or a nameless *something*, have the power of impressing themselves on the minds or hearts of others. So, while he was fast becoming devoted to her, she only experienced in his society an agreeable divertisement, which it would not materially affect her happiness to lose. Even now, when following the lead of others amongst the guests, they passed out into the warm,—almost golden,—light of the har-

vest moon, and wandered, amongst other wanderers, through the pleasure-grounds, far down out of sight of the house, passing from glade to glade, talking of poetry, poets, and pictures, and pausing for an instant, from time to time, to admire and feel together the quiet loveliness around them,—even now no touch of romance or poetry coloured the placidity of her feeling for him. Even now, while she talked brightly, and gave full attention to her companion's observations and questions, it seemed to her that her spirit was living in an inner world, which she did not care to share with him. And thoughts were passing quickly through her mind, which none, she fancied, could understand, but the ideal hero, who existed only in her own imagination. This hero's thoughts, and not her own, they seemed to be; for Margaret had no egoism; she cared little to dwell on herself, and had no grand notions as to her personal mental powers or her own peculiar sentiments.

“I little thought how pleasant I should find it down here,” abruptly said Charles

Meredith, presently. "It seemed hard lines to me, at first, having to stay in England for reading, instead of joining my people in Switzerland; but——"

"But," put in Margaret, laughingly, as he paused, "you now begin to feel the benefit of extraordinarily severe study."

"Well, I *have* been reading very hard, you know," said Charles, quickly, in a tone of half-serious, half-playful deprecation, and with a movement of his face that was something between a smile and a grimace. It was a look that Margaret knew well and liked to provoke. It amused her, because it was so quaint and peculiar, so characteristic of Charles, and of no one else. It pleased her, and yet it would have been utterly impossible for her ideal hero, her imaginary piece of perfection, to have given a similar look, or to have made a similar movement.

"Ah! I am afraid you will be worn to a skeleton soon. You really should take more care of yourself!" she returned.

"I am anxious to martyr myself for the

good of my friends," said Charles. "They may make something out of me, by-and-by, perhaps, by showing me as 'The Living Skeleton!' But, seriously, you know it is only to please my father that I care to go up for honours. What good will they do me, supposing me to be successful?"

How different from the hero! Margaret made her mental comparison to this effect, but only said aloud, "Will it not help you afterwards in your profession? You mean to be a barrister, you say?"

"As well that as anything else, perhaps," replied Charles, dejectedly. "But I have not yet made up my mind. My father wishes me to do something, although he can make me a sufficient allowance to enable me to live without. I only mean to hang by my eyelashes to my profession, however. But don't be shocked, Miss Willoughby! I do not mean to be idle; I hope——"

He paused. Hitherto, he had pictured to himself, in bright and glowing colours, a future literary life in London. But suddenly the life had faded out of the picture, and he

saw only a dark and desolate scene, unless, —unless certain wild hopes of his should chance to be fulfilled.

Margaret was looking up at him with an expression in her face that seemed to mean, —oh! what might it not mean? It expressed earnest interest. It was at once bright, and grave, and wondering; and at least, for Charles Meredith, it was dangerously beautiful. Poor Charles! If he could have read her mind, if he could have known that as she gazed up into his face the eyes of her imagination were seeing the ideal hero, whose whole life was earnest, whose vocation, whatever it might be, was to himself sacred, would he then have dared to breathe aloud the presumptuous hopes which now came like waves surging thick and fast through his brain and heart, and which it seemed no longer possible to restrain within the bounds of prudence?

“Miss Willoughby,” he cried, suddenly, in an altered tone, “may I speak to you? I—I have something that I must say to you;” he stammered, hardly knowing what he

uttered, almost feeling as if he were speaking out of a dream.

In a moment scales fell from Margaret's eyes. She knew all; she saw and understood, at last! She stood still for an instant, frightened. In that instant, turning her head, she saw that some of the rest of the wandering party were beginning to stroll back towards the house. She would have followed them. "Let us go back with the others. We ought to go back," is what she would have said. But instead of this, "Oh, please don't!" she cried, abruptly, in an imploring tone. "It has been so pleasant. Oh, please, please, don't spoil it!"

"I must speak,—you must hear me," he answered, vehemently; and she found herself impelled forward against her will, and obliged to listen to his passionately tender and earnest pleadings. It was as if a dream of love in his heart had suddenly been awakened to life and activity; and words, no longer faltering and diffident, but full of force and determination, came rushing like a torrent through his lips.

Margaret, meanwhile, walked tremblingly by his side, affected she knew not how, sensible of intense distress, that yet, in spite of herself, was mingled with a strange, new, most exquisite thrill of pleasure; which, however, quickly passed into a painful yearning after a vague indescribable something, that seemed to be floating somewhere within her vision, but far away out of her reach. It was one of those moments of excitement in which imagination, thought, and feeling work with unusual rapidity, and the image in Margaret's ideal world had suddenly awakened into a struggle after actual life, which might not, it appeared, be satisfied. But through all the minglings of her pain and pleasure, she felt positively convinced that she did not return Charles Meredith's feeling. She liked him. It was pleasant to her to be by his side. But love?—love such as his, love such as her imagination told her it would be possible for her, too, to feel, *if* it were possible for the right person for it to be created,—the very strength of his vehemence made her all the

more certain that such an experience was very far from being hers at present. Voices, showing some of the rest of the party to be in close proximity, had again been heard, and Charles had instinctively drawn Margaret aside, into one of the many paths of the wood that they had been skirting,—a branch of the very same wood through which she had so lately passed.—Presently they came to a little trellis-work summer-house, where they stopped short, he, at the same time, pausing in his speaking, to look at her with inquiring, pleading eyes.

Then she realized the pain that she must give, and with a look that was inexpressibly sad and pitiful, she answered, tremulously, “I never dreamed of this. I knew you liked me, I felt that you were kind to me; but I did not—I did not dream that you had thought of me in this way. Indeed, I am not worthy of it, and I,—I cannot,—oh, forgive me for causing you this pain!”

Her voice was very gentle, tears filled her eyes. And as his hopes sank she seemed to Charles ten thousand times dearer even than

she had seemed when first he had begun to speak. He had listened breathlessly, trusting for some word that might at least bring to him a little glimmering of hope. But now he replied, in a tone that was almost stern in its calm hopelessness,—

“You cannot love me, I see. I was a fool to think it possible you might.”

“Indeed, you are too, too good,” she began; and as she hesitated, all the agony of his disappointment came over him, and he said, imploringly,—

“Can you give me *no* hope? Is it impossible that you might some time learn to love me?”

She shook her head. “Not in the way you mean,” she said. “Not as you deserve. But—but—I—I——”

What could she say to soothe and console him? She felt—she knew—what he was suffering. She felt that conventional words about sisterly affection, friendship, thoughts and prayers, would only mock him in his grief. Her heart was full, but her imagination was telling her that the man ordained

to possess its love was not this man with whom she was now feeling so keenly.

“But why—why is it quite impossible that you may some time learn to love me?” he broke in, with almost fierce persistency. “Is there——?”

“I have never seen anyone that I could care about in that way,” said Margaret, quickly, answering the jealous thought of his heart. “I think I never shall, for if I should, it would be some one who——”

Once more she paused. The look that he had seen before came into her eyes. The warm moonlight slanted across her somewhat upturned face. There was a short silence, and then, “I will tell you something,” she said, suddenly, in a confiding tone, which filled his quickly-throbbing heart anew with jealous fears; “I will tell you something that I have told to no one else. All my life long I have had fancy people about me. They were children when I was a child, and now they are grown up. They are good, but never tiresome in their goodness,—good, and true, and delightful and

pleasant. One of them, the best of all, was very brave, and kind, and gentle, as a boy. I loved him dearly then, he was so different from all the tiresome real boys that I knew ; and now that he is grown up he is,—oh, I cannot say it to you ! It seems to me as if I knew him really, and he helps me by being so good and great, and so earnest in his work. He does not do sometimes one thing, and sometimes another thing, just as the fancy takes him, as I do ; but he has a work that he puts his whole heart into. He does not mind how much trouble it gives him. He does not feel the trouble. It is not for himself. It——”

Again she hesitated, afraid of giving utterance to the grave thought that was in her mind ; then she continued eagerly,—

“It helps a world of people to be better and happier. And——”

Here she glanced suddenly up into his face, and something that she read there made her pause abruptly. Something new had come over him ! He no longer appeared to her merely a pleasant, amiable,

negative sort of being. There was an inspired look on his countenance, as though he had just received a revelation, as though he had heard a Voice from the Unseen, calling upon him to fulfil the office of a Prophet. Margaret's heart beat fast, her cheeks flushed, and it seemed to her, all in an instant, that she had been brought into the presence of her ideal hero,—that the shadowy creation of her fancy had become an actual creature of flesh and blood. She stood in momentary confusion, and Charles was the first to break silence. In a low and quiet tone, as though he had put aside his wild hopes of happiness, and were only waiting to learn what he must do, how he might obey the new impulse that had been given to him,—

“And what is the work,” he asked, “what is the work, Miss Willoughby, into which your fancy friend puts his whole heart?”

How was Margaret to reply? Her enthusiasm for the ideal hero seemed to have vanished, and she would have given worlds to hear the new-found substantial reality

address her again in the same tone in which he had so lately spoken. But as he stood gazing at her, as though she was a goddess from whom he was to receive his commands, she answered, with quick excitement,—

“His work?” I scarcely know, in detail, what it is. But he forgets himself in it, like Shakespeare, and Turner, and Mendelssohn,—and as all great workers must forget themselves (*you* think they must? We were talking about it the other day, you remember?); and his whole life is like a beautiful poem.”

“If only the thought of you might help my life to become like a beautiful poem, which you would care to read, I might better learn to bear the loss of my one hope of happiness,” returned Charles, as she concluded.

“Not the thought of *me*,” she faltered, for he seemed to her so godlike at the moment, that she was humiliated by the knowledge that he was looking up to her unworthy self with reverence.

“Forgive me, Miss Willoughby,” he said, sadly, misinterpreting her meaning, “for-

give me ! I understand you fully. I shall not dream any longer that you are holding out to me a hope for the future, and I will try to look to that other help of which you tell me. But, whatever may happen to me, whatever changes may come, I shall never leave off loving you. I could not live if I had not you to love."

He turned away his head as though to hide from her sight the look of agony that had overspread his features.

"I," she began, after a pause, during which the intensity of her feelings had not allowed her to speak, "I——"

Who knows what blessed hope her hesitating answer might have bought to Charles ? Who knows what he might have replied, and what she once more might have returned to him ? Who knows but that angel hands might have drawn together their two hearts, and have opened the eyes of each to know all the secrets of the other, if—if a third person had not suddenly entered upon the scene, and brought the *tête-a-tête* to a premature conclusion ?

“Oh, here you are, Margaret, at last!” cried some one in a querulous tone of voice, which was intended to be pathetic.” I have been hunting for you high and low! Mrs. Willoughby says it is time to go, and I have obtained leave for one more dance, as you were out of the way when it came to your turn.”

“My turn? Its time had not been specified, except in your own mind!” said Margaret, with a forced laugh. “Out of the way? But surely you and your partner were of our party when we wandered off, after the waltz on the lawn?”

“Yes, but I was back in time for the last waltz, and had thought you were following.”

“We remained out longer, with some of the rest of the party.”

“I promised Mrs. Willoughby to bring you back, now, at all events.”

“All right, I suppose we had better come, then,” said Margaret, trying to speak in an unconcerned tone.

“Unless you are more pleasantly engaged,—too bad of you, Meredith, to

carry off my partner," went on Miles, looking with an aggrieved air from one to the other, and offering his arm to Margaret, with the manner of one who considered that she was his personal property, and that it would be a piece of unheard of impertinence in any one who dared to dispute his right to do what he chose with her.

In sheer nervousness, in the fear lest the odious Miles should begin to imagine that there was "something between" herself and Charles Meredith, Margaret began a laughing apology, and permitted herself to be carried off with an apparently good grace. But when Charles glanced at her, he perceived on her face the tender glow which he might have observed there before the arrival of the intruder; and out of her eyes still looked the tender wistfulness which had been there also, though he had not seen it, even when she was beginning the tremulous answer which Miles had interrupted. And while she laughed and chatted, mechanically, with the man she so cordially disliked, her heart was full,—oh that

Charles might have seen into its depths!—her heart was full, and was aching with a longing to be able to recall a lost opportunity. Charles, meanwhile, twisting and turning her words in his memory, and thinking humbly of himself, teased and vexed his mind with insupportable surmises. Was it possible, he thought, that only a word from Miles Grantham was needed, in order to discover to Margaret Willoughby the reality of her ideal hero! He believed Miles to be a far better and cleverer fellow than himself. He believed him to be no muff, in spite of his priggish manner, and effeminate voice and appearance.

“And yet, how I hate the fellow!” he thought. “Jealous, I suppose! Can it be only this that makes him seem to me so utterly offensive and distasteful? Am I a mean brute? If he loves her and she loves him, what am I, to——? But ugh!” Here, with a sudden impatient contraction of his face, and a tight clenching together of his teeth, he paused abruptly in his magnanimous thoughts, and asked himself impetu-

ously, "Is it possible that she can love him, —that she can love *him*?"

Then again there was a reaction in his mind, while the inspiration, the noble impulse, which her words and looks had seemed to bring, came sweeping once more over his spirit.

"I will sound him," he thought, "and if I wrong him, if he is in earnest, if he is worthy of her, if he has made her love him, —for her sake I will forbear to interfere, for her sake I will be strong, for her sake I will try to rise into a better and higher life! And yet, and yet, what good is there in strength and nobleness, what good in any thing, if I may not have her, if I may not have her love?"

This,—amidst all his thoughts, while he kept in the rear, amidst his attempts at lively replies when appealed to by either of the two whom he imagined to be taken up with each other,—this expressed the strong undercurrent of feeling by which his aching heart was unceasingly oppressed.

Gaily laughing and talking, the three

entered the drawing-room. Music struck up. And Margaret found herself being whirled round in a waltz, which seemed at once the most blissful and the most miserable that she had ever danced. A brighter gleam of joy than any that had crossed the horizon of her dreams had now darted, meteor-like, across the path of her actual life,—joy, surely, moreover, that would increase, joy of which she was to have her fill! Such was the sweet tale which the bewitching music seemed to be telling her, with variations and repetitions which were never otherwise than sweet! But there was an undertone of sadness. For her memory was haunted by words sadly spoken, and by a look of sorrowful hopelessness. Oh, when would the music cease? When should she be freed from its tyranny, and have it in her power to change those mournful looks, those sad tones, into expressions of great hope and overwhelming joy? Surely there never was a waltz so interminable! When, when would it come to an end? She felt instinctively, as she was wafted round, that her

movements were followed by a pair of sadly thoughtful eyes looking out from the bay window! She felt that that corner in the window contained for her all sorrow and all gladness,—she felt that all her world was there! Why had it not power at once to attract her to itself,—to break the nightmare thralldom by which she seemed to be bound? Presently a buzz of voices came round about her world, and then it migrated and seemed to pass away out of her sight; only she heard Sir John Grantham's full hearty voice, and knew that he was talking to Charles; and but for the music, she might have caught fragments of their conversation as it ran thus,—

“Plenty more to show you in these parts. You must not run away from us yet awhile. You were never here before, I think you said?”

“Except that I had the honour of being born somewhere about here, two-and-twenty years ago.”

“Oh, ay! Ay, ay! Two-and-twenty years ago!” A pause here, while Sir

John put his hand across his eyes, and looked for a moment into the past. "Two-and-twenty years ago!" he mused. "My boy might have been just such another, just such another as this one!" And then he knitted his brows and angrily strained his eyes in the direction of the, in his opinion, unworthy heir apparent to Grantham Hall and the Grantham baronetcy. "Nothing of my poor brother about him! That cunning, cringing face is Madam all over!"

Thus for the thousandth time ran Sir John's vexed and regretful thoughts on the subject of his much-despised nephew. But in another instant his voice was again to be heard in pleasant laughter and genial talk.

The music ceased at last. The waltz was over. Margaret's heart leaped into her mouth. The moment of longed-for liberty had surely arrived at length.

"My dear child, it is late, we must be off." Mrs. Willoughby, as she spoke, rose from the chair on which she had been seated near Lady Grantham, with whom she had been confabbing earnestly on a subject that

the two ladies were never weary of discussing, and hastened across the room to Margaret's side.

"I have not many fears," she had been saying to Lady Grantham,—“I have not many fears,” she had said, while the sounds of the final chord of the *finale* waltz were dying away; “the child is frank and pleasant in her manner to other young men, but evidently her heart is given to your dear Miles.”

“And she could not give it to one more worthy of her regard, though I say it that should not!” had Lady Grantham returned. “I am sure his attention to me,—the way he tries to supply the place of a son to his childless aunt,”—a shake of the head and a sigh had finished the sentence, and then,—

“You are tired, dear Lady Grantham. We must be going!” had prefaced Mrs. Willoughby's words of summons to her daughter. “It is late, we must be off.”

“Yes, mother, yes, in a moment,” answered Margaret, dreamily, while she withdrew her hand from Miles Grantham's arm,

and looked with a longing despair towards the opposite end of the room.

A crowd of young ladies, their partners and their mammas, divided her from Charles Meredith. Their voices sounded shrilly discordant in her ears; but over and above all the buzz and small-talk, she could hear Lady Grantham commend to Charles's care myriads of ladies who needed cloaking, refreshment, and an escort home. She could hear Charles' forced laugh and unavoidable words of courtesy, and could see the side-looks of dismay with which he prepared to fulfil the duties allotted to him.

"You have had nothing to eat. You will let me—" began Miles, in his most tiresome tones.

"Nothing, thanks," sharply interrupted Margaret.

"Then, my dear, come and get your cloak on at once," put in her mother, decidedly; and poor Margaret found herself being led with her mother, first into the cloak-room, and then out through the hall-door, down the beech-avenue, across a bit of lawn,

and through the wood; Miles Grantham being their faithful escort all the way to The Cottage. No matter! He might have been leagues away for all the difference he made to Margaret, who was wholly engrossed by her own thoughts. With restless longing, she recapitulated her conversation with Charles, shaping her answers far differently from what they had been, and, in imagination, making an ending, ah, how sweet, how full of satisfaction! Then, with a sudden rush of delicious hope, she looked forward to the next day, when all might be made as right as right could be,—yes, the past might be fully redeemed by the future!

But amidst all her changing hopes and regrets, she was haunted by a vague sense of fear, a feeling of which she could not divest herself, which seemed to tell her that the blessing she had carelessly thrown away out of her life might never be recalled,—was gone for evermore. The soft night-breeze seemed to be murmuring a sorrowful adieu, a song of vain regret. In each corner of the wood, in each shrub and tree, she

seemed to see the face of him in whom her ideal hero had found his actuality. And it seemed to her that she was followed always by large, earnest, sadly reproachful eyes!

The cottage door was reached. Absently she gave her hand in good-bye to Miles, while her gaze wandered over and beyond the wood, as though with the forlorn hope of seeing him who was far away, out of her sight. Ten minutes afterwards she might have found his very self in the wood-land walk which she had lately felt to be haunted by his memory.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER escorting Miss Craycroft, with her friend and other ladies, to their respective homes, Charles Meredith retraced his steps with the speed of despairing hope ; and saying to himself, “ I must see her once more ; I cannot rest,—I cannot arrange my thoughts and form my plans, and learn to bear this blow,—until I have looked at her again,” he made his way to the wood. Ah, that he might find her lingering with her fancies, in the soft air of the summer night ! Stay ! There is a gentle rustle ! His heart beats fast as he rounds a corner in the winding path. He pauses for a moment, and then,—a quick step brings him face to face with Miles Grantham, who, pipe in mouth and slowly sauntering, was brooding darkly, and thinking cunning thoughts.

Charles' heart gave a great sigh, which none but himself could hear, while with an imperturbable face he greeted Miles. He had hoped to meet the person whom he loved best in all the world. He had encountered, instead, the man whom, of all he had ever seen, he hated most! "Well, it was his fate! Perhaps it was best! Perhaps Miles was just the person whom at that crisis in his life it was best, it was needful that he should meet! The painful opportunity should not be thrown away!"

And soon the two young men were smoking together, and talking in amicable earnestness. The reticent Charles, who, at the beginning of the conversation, would as soon have thought of flying as of allowing his sacred secret to escape him, soon found himself letting it out to him from whom, of all others, he would most have chosen to hide it! Circumstances, necessity, it seemed, had decreed that so it should be. And good angels, looking on, could not stay his hand, could not prevent his yielding up his heart's best earthly treasure into the keeping of

an evil spirit who had power to work it woe.

Meanwhile the two young men who were thus conversing together on matters connected with their dearest interests, themselves formed subjects of thoughtful musing to many of those who had been present at the Grantham dance.

When left alone, Sir John Grantham buried his face in his hands, and bowed his head, and gave himself up to bitter musings over a far-back, painful past; or rather indulged himself in bitter thoughts of that which was for him an ever-ending source of painful regret. He lived over again years of vain longing for a son and heir. He felt once more the delicious moment when it seemed that his hopes were about to be realised. "Two-and-twenty years ago!" He lived over again a time of absence from his wife. He read again a letter from his sister-in-law, Mrs. Grantham, giving unexpected intelligence. Once more he passed through a hurried journey home, not devoid of anxiety, but chiefly full of delightful hope and excite-

ment, and followed by the breathless instant of arrival, the welcome news “doing well,” given, however, in faltering tones and with mournful looks, which cruelly told a cruel tale. Again he was seeing the hateful face of his sister-in-law, from whom he had ever since felt an unconquerable aversion! Once more the bitter moment in which he discovered that his baby-son was dead came back to him. Again he touched the poor little wasted face, and the little, little hands! And again he broke away impatiently from the affected drawl of his sister-in-law’s consolatory words, “Better this, dear John, better this, than that he should have grown up sickly and diseased! Better this than to have lost him later on, when you would have learnt to love your boy!” “Learnt to love him!” At this moment the baronet’s heart yearned over the lost son for whose birth he had longed so anxiously, and he almost groaned aloud, “Two-and-twenty years!” An echo through his mind, from Charles Meredith’s words, which had taken him into the past, now recalled him to the present.

“Ah,” he sighed, as he thought of the attractive and noble face of his young friend,—“ah, if *her* son had been like that fine young fellow, instead of the mean young humbug that he is, my loss would not have been so bitter,—would not have been so bitter!”

Very different from her husband's were the regretful musings in which Lady Grantham indulged that night. According to her nightly custom, when her maid had left her, she took out of a chest a ghastly picture of her dead baby, gazed at it, shook her head, sighed, let a tear fall upon it, kissed it, and put it away again, murmuring tenderly, “My little boy! my little boy!” But before long her thoughts were pleasantly resting in the present. She reflected how merciful it was that her childless life had been comforted by so good and affectionate a nephew as Miles Grantham. And then she mused over all his perfections, and thought how pleasant were his frequent visits, and his tender attentions to herself! “Dear Miles,” she thought, “he is quite a

son to me!" After which, her mind passed rapidly over the many blessings of her life. Her lot certainly had fallen upon pleasant places. Above all things, there was her husband's love. Then there was the affection of her many friends; and on this head came in a pleasing romance. How delightful it would be to help forward the evidently growing attachment between Miles and her favourite, Margaret Willoughby. The girl had good birth, a little fortune, personal attractions,—everything, in short, that a Grantham could wish to find. Nothing could be more satisfactory to all parties. She could not possibly be making a mistake in trying to promote so desirable an union! But what would she have said if she could have seen within the heart of her favourite that night?

Fain would Margaret have remained out amidst the trees and flowers, to dream of her hopes and joys, and to try to stifle her fears and her regrets! But her mother's "My dear, make haste and come to bed," was not to be gainsaid, and there was

nothing for it but to hasten over her preparations for bed, and to lie down by her mother's side, with all the restless excitement which made sleep for her impossible. Would the night never end? Must the regrets and the unreasonable fears which pressed upon her with night-mare-like exaggeration, go on for ever? Would the morning never bring with it relief and hope and action?

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER disturbed slumberings and wakings and slumberings again, Margaret awoke at length, to daylight, and hoping she knew not what from an early rising, stole from her mother's side, and was soon wandering in the garden, feeling for a time nothing but the enjoyment of pleasant anticipation. After all, what was there to fear? What was there not to hope from the events of the coming day. Visions of a happy meeting, a happy talk, sweet things being said, explanations being made, matters being satisfactorily arranged, came over her in a rush, and left her in a glow of impatience for the hour which must be already on its wing, to arrive.

When would he come? Would it be soon? Would it be before luncheon, or

not until the afternoon? How slowly the time passed! "Not nine o'clock yet!" When would it be breakfast time? When would her mother be down? "Nine at last!" Why was her mother so slow about coming down? Supposing Mr. Meredith should call while they were at breakfast, to make arrangements for a driving or walking expedition, and should go away not liking to disturb them! Oh, why was her mother so dawdling on this particular morning?

She had worked herself up into a regular fidget, and at length, in a fever of impatience, was running quickly up to the dinging-room window, to see why the prayer-bell did not ring, when her attention was arrested by the shriek of a railway whistle.

"How I hate that horrid sound!" she said, petulantly, putting her hands up to her ears. "The nine-ten train! How late mamma is!"

But yet she found herself standing to listen to the rush of the train, and to watch until an opening through trees brought the distant steam-engine into momentary view.

She musingly gazed at the long curling cloud of white steam, as it floated sideways on the morning breeze and disappeared into vapour. And as she did so an imaginary horror seized her mind, the thought of a dreadful possibility, from which she awoke, as from a bad dream, to the pleasant reality of the happy summer's day before her.

The prayer-bell was ringing, and she hastened in doors.

“What a perfect morning, mother!” she exclaimed, as she entered through the open window. “We must certainly get up a pic-nic to-day, or do something pleasant.”

“Very well, my dear; I dare say Lady Grantham will chaperon you; but don't speak so loud,” replied her mother, leaning languidly back in her chair, and pressing her hand on the top of her head.

Margaret's heart sank. “A headache?” she cried, “oh, mother! on this particular day!” And then reproaching herself for feeling selfish disappointment when her mother was suffering, “Of course we can-

not go anywhere to-day," she added. And when prayers and breakfast were over, her thoughts were taken up with her mother's wants.

But after settling Mrs. Willoughby on the sofa in her own room, with salts and *eau-de-cologne*, and all the usual requirements of a nervous headache, every possible occupation for the morning seemed to her to be over. She could not give her attention to a book, she could not work without getting the fidgets, she could not write or draw, and music was out of the question on her mother's account. It seemed to her that she could not breathe unless she went out of doors; but even when there she could not rest, for she was never free from the thought that she might have missed hearing a bell at the hall door, and that if she were not in the drawing-room she might be supposed by the servant to be "not at home." So she spent her morning principally in passing in and out of the drawing-room window; at times her heart beat quickly with expectation, and then again sank down

low with disappointment. At length she had given up expectation, and comforting herself with the reflection that the morning was nearly over, and that the afternoon *must* bring with it satisfactory results, she had betaken herself to the wood, and had fallen into a pleasant reverie, when suddenly her ear caught a distant sound of feet scuffling along gravel. And,—yes, surely there was a bell,—was it the front door bell? All her restlessness had returned! Once more she hurried across the lawn and through the drawing-room window. No one was there, but on the table lay a parcel of books and a note.

“The Hon. Mrs. Willoughby, with Charles Meredith’s best thanks,” read Margaret, taking up the parcel; and the note, also, was directed to Mrs. Willoughby. “Why, he only took the books away with him yesterday,” she said to herself, “and he generally brings them back himself! How very odd! What can be the meaning of it? Oh, dear, I wish I might open the note! Dillson,” she added, to the manservant who

came in to announce luncheon, "was any answer asked for to this note?"

"No, miss."

"Will you tell Jane I want to speak to her?"

"Yes, miss."

"Jane," went on Margaret, when the lady's maid appeared, "have you been to mamma lately?"

"Half an hour ago, miss, she rang for me."

"Oh, then I can go to her," interrupted Margaret.

"No, Miss Margaret, you must not go to her," called out Jane, as Margaret was running off. "Your mamma particularly desired that she might not be disturbed. I took her up a bit of luncheon, and she don't want anything more."

It was too provoking! Margaret's only resource was to hasten to the Hall, as soon as she had despatched her luncheon, in order to find out whether anything had been heard of her friend.

"Well, my dear, so that strange young

man has disappeared," said Lady Grantham, after words of greeting and so forth, had been exchanged between her and her young friend.

"Who?" returned Margaret, blushing scarlet, in spite of all her efforts to appear unconcerned.

"Have not you heard?" said Lady Grantham, looking hard at her, and continuing, "my dear, forgive me, but I fancy you must know something about it. You did quite right. He is not worthy of you. Besides, I believe he is all but engaged to another young lady. I do not wonder at his hurrying off in this fashion, without so much as coming to wish any of us good-bye!"

"I don't understand you, Lady Grantham," returned Margaret, turning very pale, but speaking in a calm and rather haughty tone of voice. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"Surely, my darling, you have heard that Mr. Meredith has gone?" said Lady Grantham, at length becoming more explicit.

“Miles was with him late last night, and saw him off by the nine o’clock train this morning, and gave us the news at breakfast. He spoke very feelingly. Of course *he* can feel for him better than the rest of us can;” here Lady Grantham gave Margaret a meaning smile. “Dear Miles! You know what a generous creature he is; but even he cannot deny that his friend has behaved very badly.”

“Lady Grantham,” replied Margaret, warmly, drawing herself up, and speaking with a touch of scorn in her tone, which Lady Grantham might or might not have noticed,—“Lady Grantham, whatever Miles may have taken it into his head to fancy, I am quite sure that he can *know* nothing but what is good of Mr. Meredith.”

“My dear,” said Lady Grantham, in an exhortatory manner, “you really must not allow yourself to be so easily taken in. It is very amiable; but,—only think if you had been of a more susceptible nature, and if things had been a little different from what they are, what a blighted life yours might

have been now ! Miles, as you know, is not apt to entertain suspicions against any one without sufficient cause. But to say the truth, I never thoroughly liked that young man. He is very pleasant, just the sort of creature to take a young girl's heart by storm, but he does not give me the notion of being steady ; and, in short, my dear, I am sure he is not worthy of any young woman's regard. What a contrast there is between him and Miles !”

“Certainly ; there could not well be two people more unlike !” said Margaret, who was sorely tempted to launch out strongly on the subject of her companion's nephew, but contented herself with a contemptuous smile at his expense. “But surely, Lady Grantham,” she went on, “I have often heard both you and Sir John praise Mr. Meredith up to the skies ? I thought that you had taken a great fancy to him. Miles must——”

The entrance of Miles himself cut off the remainder of her speech.

“What is it that Miles must do ?” he

asked, in his affected drawl, as he squeezed her unwilling hand, and half raised to hers, and then self-consciously lowered, his cowardly eyes, just avoiding the sight of the contemptuous curl of her lip with which she returned his greeting.

“I was just telling Margaret about Mr. Meredith’s sudden departure. I believe she thinks that you are rather hard upon him,” said Lady Grantham.

“Hard upon him! Indeed, Margaret, it is *you* who are hard upon *me*! Hard upon him! I am awfully sorry for him, I can assure you. *I* ought to be the last person to blame him too severely.”

Margaret could have knocked him down as he spoke.

“He consulted me, and I hope I gave him good advice; for his own sake I thought he was right to go.”

“Where is he gone to?” asked Margaret, unconcernedly, wilfully misunderstanding the words of Miles’ mysterious whisper. “I suppose he means to return?”

“N—o, I—I fancy not,” answered Miles,

somewhat taken aback by her manner. "He is going up to town for a day or two, I believe, and after that I don't know what his plans may be. Perhaps he will write."

"Perhaps so," returned Margaret. "Good-bye, Lady Grantham; I must go home and see how mamma is. Good-bye, Miles."

"Could not you and your mother come in quietly this evening?" called out Lady Grantham after her, as she was making her escape through the window.

"Thanks, Lady Grantham; but I am afraid mamma will not be up to it," answered Margaret, running off, wilfully heedless that Miles had intended to accompany her home.

She found Mrs. Willoughby in the drawing-room, and almost well again.

"So you have been to the Hall, my dear?" she said, with a smile, as Margaret appeared.

"Yes, mother. Have you found your note?"

"From Mr. Meredith? Yes. You have

heard, I suppose, that he has left? It is a very sudden change of plan ! ”

“ Does he give any reason ? ” asked Margaret.

Her mother gave her the note. “ Grateful and civil,” she said, as she watched Margaret’s eyes pass quickly over the sheet, “ but mysterious, to say the least of it.”

Margaret was silent, and her mother was puzzled by the expression of her face as she kept it bent over the letter, reading again and again to herself the words, “ Pray believe that I shall never forget the great kindness which you and your daughter have shown to me during the happy weeks that I have spent in your neighbourhood.”

“ Fancy his going off in this sudden manner ! ” went on Mrs. Willoughby. “ There is something nice about the boy. He is pleasant, but not very interesting. I should not say that he had a vast amount of brain.”

“ Mother, his going is all Miles’ doing,” said Margaret, suddenly looking up.

“ Miles’ doing ! What in the world do

you mean, my dear? What could Miles have to do with his going?"

"Oh mother, mother, help me!" cried Margaret, all her reserve breaking down in a moment, while all the meaning of her trouble came over her. And kneeling down by her mother, she leaned her head upon her lap, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"My child, my child, what is it?" said Mrs. Willoughby, soothingly.

And when she was calm enough to speak, Margaret told her mother all the story of her joy and grief.

"Oh, mother, do you think he will come back again?" she said. "Do you think that I shall ever be able to explain to him,—to let him know that,—that,— Oh, mother, I was so unkind, so cruel! Oh, how could I be so blind and stupid!" And getting quickly up from her knees, she clasped her hands together in an agony of unavailing regret.

"My darling! my darling! it will be all right, if you will only believe it. Indeed,

you are distressing yourself unnecessarily," her mother said, caressingly.

"Do you really think it will be all right, mother?" asked Margaret, eagerly. "Do tell me what we can do?"

"I will think it over, my love; and meanwhile you must be patient, and remember that you have nothing with which to reproach yourself. In a few days you may feel very differently from what you do now. You are excited to-day, and do not understand your own feelings."

Margaret's heart sank. This was not the sort of comfort that she wanted. "What do you mean, mamma?" she said, sadly.

"I mean, dear child, that I think you are giving way to fanciful and morbid regrets. You liked Mr. Meredith, and were pleased at his liking you. You are sorry for him, and now that he is out of your reach you begin to dream that you return his affection."

A storm of passion seemed to take possession of Margaret while her mother's words came out in slow and measured tones. She

only looked her answer. She could not speak, but her face expressed something of the pain, wonderment, and consternation that she was feeling.

“And probably,” went on Mrs. Willoughby, “you exaggerate, also, the strength of his feeling for you. You may be mistaking a mere passing fancy for love, and——”

“Mother!” burst in Margaret, at length, “how little you know, how little you understand!”

“My dear child,” said her mother, “I know and understand well enough! I can sympathize with you perhaps better than you think. I had my own dreams and fancies when I was a girl like you; and when I was about your age I think I must have been very much in your present state of mind. I fancied myself in love with some one who paid me great attentions, but by-and-by it turned out that he had been flirting with another girl all the time, and then I discovered the worth of the man who really cared for me.”

Mrs. Willoughby spoke in measured tones,

and it seemed to Margaret as if she were slowly and indifferently reading her thoughts out of a book. All the more she felt how little her mother was understanding her actual trouble and difficulty.

“Well, mamma,” she answered, this time speaking quietly enough, “at all events it was not a man like Miles Grantham who cared, or *could* care, about you really; and I do not quite see that your case was very like mine.”

“My dear,” returned her mother, “I cannot bear to hear you speak of Miles in the tone that you do. It is mere perversity, because you know how much he loves you, and how much our hearts are set on your——”

“Mother,” broke in Margaret, impetuously, “don’t say it! please, don’t say it! You know—you know quite well that it would be utterly impossible for me to take to Miles!” She paused, too breathless with agitation to say more; and her mother, seeing her face of disgust, felt that she had been imprudent, and added more kindly,—

“Well, well, my love, we will not say

anything more about it now. I only want you to try to conquer your prejudice against poor Miles. It can be nothing but a blind prejudice which keeps you from appreciating his excellence. Of course, my dear, I do not pretend to know how strong Mr. Meredith's feeling for you may be, so you need not let anything that I have said disturb you. It is only that I do not want you to mourn over spilt milk!"

"Mamma, I only said what I did say because I thought you might be able to help me. I see that you cannot, so please we will not talk any more on the subject. I will try to be patient, as you tell me; but it is very hard when one feels that things might have been all right, but for one's own fault, and when one is sure that one has made another person unhappy and can think of no way of undoing the mischief."

"My love, do not you suppose that Mr. Meredith could make it all right, as you say, if he chose? When a man is very eager in his love he is not in such a hurry to give up trying to win the girl he loves. And besides,

men are not so slow as you seem to imagine about discovering when they are loved, and——”

At this moment came a knock at the drawing-room door, and Miles Grantham entered.

“At any rate,” thought Margaret to herself, “some men are slow enough about discovering when they are hated!”

“I am come to see how you are, Mrs. Willoughby?” said Miles. “My aunt cannot quite give up the hope that you may be well enough to give us the pleasure of your company this evening; Margaret will have told you——”

“No, mother,” interrupted Margaret, quickly; I forgot to give Lady Grantham’s kind message; but as you had just said that you should keep quiet all day, and not go out at all——”

“Ah, but I shall be quite well enough to come to the Hall this evening,” broke in Mrs. Willoughby, eagerly. “Pray thank your aunt, and tell her that we shall be very happy to look in.”

“I really cannot go, mamma,” said Margaret, when Miles had left them to themselves again. But poor Margaret found herself obliged to submit, not only to the visit, but to more love-making on the part of Miles than she had yet had to endure. It was just such an evening as the previous one had been. Lady Grantham proposed a moonlight stroll in the grounds, and insisted upon it that the “young people” should not adapt themselves to her own and Mrs. Willoughby’s pace. And once more Margaret found herself wandering, against her will, with one companion, across lawns, by shrubberies, and through pleasant glades. Once more her favourite wood became the scene of a *tête-à-tête* walk; and once more she was listening to a young man’s professions of love and of admiration. Would it have been possible for Miles to understand the torture that he was inflicting on his companion as they walked side by side near the wooded glen,—that glen, which, as long as Margaret could remember, had been to her a happy world, peopled by imaginary

beings, and which now had become haunted, for her, by remembrances, both blissful and regretful, connected with her own actual life? Under any circumstances, to be kept prisoner by the man she hated, to have to listen to the affected softness of his voice, and to his twaddling sentiments, would have been trying enough; but to have added to this those "happier things" of that evening gone by, pressing upon her memory, made the infliction seem almost more than she could bear.

Would it never end? Must the nightmare last for evermore?

Hark! Was not that the blessed sound of an approaching footstep, giving the joyful promise of relief at hand? Was not that the delightful sound of a gentleman clearing his throat?

Yes! Another moment brought them face to face with Sir John Grantham! and the *tête-à-tête* was put an end to just in time to avoid the answering of an awkwardly-put question.

"Beg pardon," said Sir John, making as

though to pass by; I did not mean to be guilty of interrupting a *tête-à-tête*."

"Oh, I am so glad we have met you," cried Margaret, eagerly. "I have hardly spoken to you all the evening, and Miles and I are so stupid to-night, that I think we should have had to murder each other for the sake of a little excitement, if you had not suddenly appeared on the scene.

"Ah, we want poor Charlie Meredith to enliven us!" cried Sir John, as he turned and began walking, with his hand on his darling's shoulder, and looked searchingly into her blushing face.

"Yes, you will miss him, Sir John," she answered, with affected carelessness, "and so shall we all. Why did he go off in such a hurry?"

"I thought you and Miles knew all about that," returned Sir John. "He seemed out of spirits last night, and hinted that it might be necessary for him to run away sooner than he had intended; but I did not know that he was speaking quite in such sober earnest."

"He would have been a scoundrel if he

remained any longer!" put in Miles, and his self-conscious face bore a black and evil expression as he spoke.

"Miles' talent for enigma grows!" cried Margaret, with a forced laugh. "He might have taken a first-class degree in that accomplishment, if in nothing else! Oh, don't let us turn up by the lawn yet. It is too fine to go in. You and I must have a *tête-à-tête* walk now, dear Sir John," she said, looking coaxingly up into his face, and without paying any attention to Miles' die-away looks, she dragged her old friend along the way she chose to go, according to an old established custom against which he would have found it useless to rebel.

In fact, ever since she was a toddling child of two years old Margaret had had pretty much her own way with Sir John Grantham, and had been allowed to tyrannise over him and plague him, to her heart's content, getting nothing worse than caresses and petting in return for all her coercion and tyranny.

"Well, what have you got to say to me

now you have got me, childie? It is a little hard,—is not it,—to have *chasé-ed* poor Miles in that off-hand manner?" he said, now with very gentle reproach.

"Indeed, sometimes I wish I could *chasser* him altogether," returned Margaret. "Oh, if you could know what a tease and nuisance,—forgive me, I ought not to have said this to you, dear Sir John, when he is your nephew."

Sir John was looking very grave. He turned away to smother a sigh, and then, "My dear, I think you *are* hard upon Miles," he said. "I believe I am hard upon him myself sometimes. But I know, from what my wife says, how really good and worthy he is! And you and I must try to understand him better. We must not allow ourselves to be prejudiced by little peculiarities of manner. We must not forget that it is not always the most attractive people who make the most desirable friends. That young Meredith is a taking fellow enough, but he may be very wild."

Sir John was not like himself! Margaret

had never heard him speak in such a prim and tiresome way before! What in the world did he mean? Miles must have got hold of him and made him believe something false. And yet he hated Miles as much as she did, of this Margaret was sure. What did it mean? Poor Margaret! It meant that on one point, and that a vital point, she was not to have her own way, even with her indulgent old friend Sir John Grantham. It meant that even he was uniting with the other conspirators who, unknown to her, in their very love and kindness, were plotting against her future peace and happiness. In short, Sir John Grantham was as much bent as his wife upon having Margaret as a niece, adopted daughter, and the mistress elect of Grantham Hall. He sighed over the thought that so charming a creature should be thrown away on one so unworthy of her, but he could not relinquish his favourite scheme, which had been growing in his mind with the growth of Margaret's years; and there was nothing for it but to try to deceive himself into the

belief that Miles was a very good fellow, and that only his own power of appreciation was at fault. His wife, a paragon of perfection in his eyes, must surely be a better judge of character than himself: and was not she devoted to the heir apparent of Grantham Hall? He had heard something of the state of affairs connected with Charles and Margaret, and suspected more than he had heard. And it was not without a touch of remorseful regret that he reflected on what would have made so pretty an union. But he set himself sedulously to crush the foolish piece of sentiment out of his heart. "Ah, he is a pleasant young fellow!" he thought. "Better that they should not see too much of each other. It would never do! A younger son. Not sufficient means. Wild and extravagant; probably not of any family. Who knows what these Merediths may be? Would not do at all!"

"Have you any reason to suppose that he is 'wild'?" asked Margaret, presently. "I thought that you had a very high opinion of him."

“High opinion? I know nothing about him, my dear. We all agreed in enjoying his society, and we shall all agree in missing him exceedingly. I confess I don’t quite understand his running away in such a hurry. If he cares very much about us, and has a clear conscience, perhaps he will turn up again some day. Meanwhile, I believe the less some of us think of him the better. Better to make the best of what we have than to dream of that which is out of our reach, and which we, perhaps, should not like if we could have it. Eh, childie?”

Margaret had begun the *tête-à-tête* with some vague intention of becoming confidential, with some vague hope of being helped out of her troubles. But her intentions had been frozen by the unwonted chilliness of Sir John’s manner, and her hopes faded away. They were “all alike!” she thought. She must bear her burden alone; the burden which it was hard to bear, because it contained the burden of another person’s sorrow caused by herself. Certainly she would not have been encouraged had she

overheard the conversation that had taken place between her mother and Lady Grantham, who, on being left to each other's society, had eagerly begun discussing "the event of the day."

"I am afraid the poor child is a little bit fascinated," said Lady Grantham, in the course of conversation.

"Yes, but she will soon get over that," returned Mrs. Willoughby. "It would not do at all. He is a very good-natured young man, but not at all the sort of person I should choose Margaret to marry."

"No, indeed ; and if you had heard Miles talk you would think so all the more. You know how kind-hearted dear Miles is. He would not hurt a fly, dear fellow, much less slander a neighbour. He said all he could for Mr. Meredith, but it is impossible not to see what his real opinion is. And, of course, for that dear child's sake, he could not be altogether silent. My dear Mrs. Willoughby, what a treasure she has in his heart ! and he could not have made a better choice."

“No,” sighed Mrs. Willoughby, “if only——”

“But you must be firm with the dear child, my dear,” interrupted Lady Grantham, quickly. “She must conquer her romantic fancy, and learn to find out what is for her true happiness.”

“She is a dear unselfish girl. I am sure she will consider our feelings,” said Mrs. Willoughby, in her slow, languid tones; “but I am afraid I shall have rather a battle with her. I wish that tiresome young man had never come in her way! A younger son, extravagant, and—oh, it is out of the question!”

“But you don’t imagine that there is any doubt of her being really attached to Miles?” returned Lady Grantham, in rather a stiff and aggrieved manner.

“At the bottom of her heart, I am convinced that she loves him. How could she help it?” said Mrs. Willoughby. “But you know young girls are so foolish,—so fond of dreaming of the absent! When I was a girl——”

“My dear,” impatiently interrupted Lady Grantham, “she must hear nothing about the young man. She must not so much as see his name in the newspaper. We must never talk of him. If the flame is not fed, it must die out by degrees.”

“What is that about feeding the flames? Good heavens! You don’t mean to say you have been lighting the fire this sultry night!” cried Sir John Grantham, coming quickly into the drawing-room, where the ladies were now seated, and, by his loud laugh and pretended exclamation of horror, trying “to get up the steam,” as he would have expressed it, after his embarrassing and depressing conversation with Margaret.

And thus plotting and persecution for the time being were brought to an end.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Margaret awoke the next morning, she had no inclination such as she had felt on the previous one, to hurry up and out of doors. There was nothing to be ready for, no joy to reach after, no opportunity to arrive for making straight that which had been made crooked, nothing to come!—nothing but a weary day of regret before her! With a great pain at her heart, which seemed to strike freshly from time to time, she mused wonderingly over the change which the last few days had brought into her life. Was it possible that so short a time could have passed since that morning when she had last awakened to the old state of things, to life in that Dreamland which would have been the perfection of happiness if it could only have become a reality?

Was it only the day before yesterday that she had gone about so happily and carelessly ignorant of the great flash of light that was coming to meet her, and of the shadow with which she herself was to overcast the unexpected light? Could it have been only two nights since this had happened, —since she who loved him had darkened *his* life? Could it have been only the morning of the day before that she had been so full of hope and of anxiety? It seemed as if in the short space of time she had lived the life of two long ages, and that now there was nothing more to come! And yet life had grown so much richer, so infinitely dearer, that she would not for the world have gone back to what it had been before it had shown her that she loved him! “Nothing more to come!” Yes, so it seemed, for there was nothing that she could do, there was no one who could help her, every one was against her, no one cared for him! There was nothing for it but to wait. She must learn to be patient. As she resigned herself, however, to this

thought, and made her resolution of patience, hope began unawares to spring up again in her heart. It was possible, at least, that a letter might come from Mr. Meredith that very day, to Lady Grantham or to her mother. It was even possible that he might change his mind and return! In short, a thousand hopeful possibilities began to shape themselves in her imagination. But then there was Miles!—Miles, who was always ready to work mischief and spoil sport. And at the recollection of Miles, the cunning kill-joy, her heart sank again, and muttering to herself, “He *shall not* have it all his own way, and make everybody miserable,” she jumped out of bed, all her patience and resignation changed into very impatient restlessness.

She was certain of Charles Meredith’s love, her faith in it had not been in the least degree shaken by the chilling words of her mother and her friends; but she determined for the future to keep her treasure to herself. No one should see how much she cared. She would ask for news of Mr.

Meredith in an unconcerned and natural manner, and Sir John Grantham should be made to feel that Miles was not to be trusted, and that Mr. Meredith was deserving of all faith and confidence.

“Oh, dear, how I wish that the morning was over!” sighed Margaret, walking towards the window, after a glance at the breakfast table, where lay what she considered an uninteresting set of letters for her mother.

“How tiresome and stupid everything looks and seems! What can I do until it is time for me to go to Grantham Hall, to see——”

“My dear child, what is the matter? What are you grumbling about?”

Mrs. Willoughby had entered unperceived by Margaret, who turned round quickly, startled and annoyed by her mother’s languidly-spoken interruption to her soliloquy.

“No letters, that is all,” she answered, brusquely. “A headache again, mother?”

“My dear, you know I always have one, more or less,” returned her mother, with a sigh. “I wish you would learn to be a little more gentle.”

“Why *can't* the doctors cure you?” impatiently exclaimed Margaret, almost thankful for something on which to vent her irritation.

“Ah, they will never do that,” returned Mrs. Willoughby, resignedly. “Never mind me, my dear. For your sake, though, I wish I had my health! If I were only up to travelling, we might have carried out Lady Grantham’s pleasant little proposal. She and Miles had been agreeing that a trip abroad would do you good, and I believe it was Miles’ suggestion that he should be our escort on the continent.”

“Very charming!” cried Margaret; “and then we might top up with a lunatic asylum, where we might dream perpetually that we were still gazing at snow mountains in Miles Grantham’s sweet society!”

“Don’t be silly, Margaret,” returned her mother. “You are very wrong and ungrateful! You little know all that you have to thank Miles for.”

“I do indeed little know all that I have to thank Miles for!” thought Margaret,

bitterly, to herself, but aloud she said, "Well, but, mother, as you are not up to the carrying out of this delightful scheme, it is perhaps as well that my inclinations do not lean that way." And so she deftly changed the topic of conversation to one almost equally interesting to Mrs. Willoughby, viz., that of her own poor health.

Then followed a weary morning! Having settled her mother on the sofa, and preformed her various errands, she seated herself with a book, which, however, for the most part, lay idly on her knee, while her thoughts strayed far away. If she might only have been left to the luxury of her sad or restless musings, without the disturbing influence of her mother's continually recurring glance, they would have been easier to bear. But to have to feel Mrs. Willoughby's eyes fixed curiously upon her, from time to time, was almost more, it seemed, than flesh and blood could endure.

"My dear, you seem to be very idle to day, I wish you would try to rouse yourself,"

said her mother, presently, languidly looking off from her crochet work.

It was not Mrs. Willoughby's wont to trouble herself much as to whether Margaret was industrious or not,—why should she have done so on this particular morning? Margaret knit her brows, tried to stifle a feeling of irritation, and once more took up her book, but soon she involuntarily let it fall again on her lap.

“My dear Margaret, I wish you would get something to do! I don't like to see you wasting your time in this way,” said her mother, presently.

“I was reading,” returned Margaret, rising quickly from her seat and putting her book upon the table. “But I believe it is too hot to do anything. I am lazy, somehow. Shall I go and talk to Gilling, mother, about those rose-buddings that you want him to get from the Hall gardener?”

The rose-buddings were a happy notion, and she went out into the August sunshine, saying to herself, “What a fool I was! What a fool I was! What a happy day this

might have been ! How happy *he* might have been ! And now,—and now ! ”

Thus sighing, she made her way to the garden, where she found old Gilling standing, in meditative mood, and with an expression of such gloom on his face as might have been caused by a reflection from her own thoughts.

“ Gilling ! ” she called, “ Gilling ! ” and he started as if he had been surprised in the performance of some guilty deed.

“ Why, Miss Marget, how sudden you do come down upon a body, to be sure ! ” and Margaret laughed merrily at his discomfiture.

“ What is the matter, Gilling ? ” she asked. “ Are all the rose-trees dying ? or have you been committing murder or theft ? ”

“ Matter ? What should be the matter, Miss Marget ? ” returned the old man, testily. “ Thank heaven my conscience is clear as to the eighth commandment and the sixth, too, and, for the matter of that, I can’t see but what I’ve kept all the commandments reg’lar all my life.”

“And how is your wife, Gilling?”

“Terrible low and bad, to be sure. You haven’t been to see her lately, Miss Marget.”

“No,” answered Margaret, her heart smiting her; “yesterday, I—I don’t know how it has happened. I’ll go this afternoon.”

“She’ll be terribly glad to see you. She’ve been talking of you a deal. And what’s gone so sudden with that young gentleman what was down here, Miss Marget?” asked old Gilling, abruptly, while he turned his inquisitive glance straight upon poor Margaret’s disconcerted countenance.

“I can’t tell you, Gilling,” she replied, with an embarrassed laugh. “I suppose he was not able to stay here any longer.”

“I suppose he’ll be coming back again?”

“I don’t know, indeed. Scarcely likely, I should fancy.”

“He’s a nice spoken gentleman. My old woman thinks a deal of him, says as Mr. Miles ain’t fit to hold a candle to him. But I ain’t going to have nothing said agen Mr. Miles. He’s been a good friend to me, and——”

“By-the-by, that reminds me, Gilling,” interrupted Margaret, “mamma wished me to speak to you about the rose-buddings.”

“Oh, yes, miss.; I’ll go over to the Hall. Here comes Mr. Miles! You must be quick if you want to hide from him, Miss Marget,” whispered the old man, with a wink.

Many a time, in her childhood, had he helped Margaret to find a hiding-place from the teasing search of her tyrannical play-fellow, Miles. And never in her childhood would she so gladly have hailed a refuge from her tormentor as at this present moment. But alas, she had been seen! She could not with any degree of decency make her escape, and Mr. Miles, the grown gentleman, might not be treated so uncerimoniously by the old gardener as Master Miles, the schoolboy, had been treated in days of old.

“Margaret,” said Miles, coming close up to her, “Mrs. Willoughby sent me to look for you. I have come to ask you if you will ride with me this afternoon.”

“Thanks, but I have an engagement, and cannot possibly ride,” returned Margaret.

Of course, however, all Margaret's objections were overruled by her mother, and of course she was obliged to say that she would go.

"Margaret," said Miles, when conversation seemed to be flagging, during the course of the afternoon ride, "I heard from Meredith this morning. He desires his kindest regards to everybody, and especially to you and your mother.

"Really!" returned Margaret.

"Perhaps," said Miles, in a would-be tender and pathetic tone, which nevertheless affected Margaret's mind somewhat in the like manner as she might have been affected physically by a polar wind in spring, "perhaps you would have preferred a warmer message!"

"I would prefer, if you please," answered Margaret, "to talk of something else."

"But I," said Miles, "choose that you should listen to me. Margaret, you shall trifle with me no longer——"

"Trifle!" echoed Margaret, with a glance of haughty astonishment. "Trifle? What

do you mean? Do you mean anything, or——”

“I mean, Margaret,” returned Miles, theatrically, “I mean, in all sober earnestness, that I will be satisfied, once for all, as to whether you have been playing with me all this time, whether each look or word, which I have innocently interpreted to signify devotion such as that which I feel for you, whether each apparent sign of love has been a mere mockery,—a mere pretence, such as that which Charles Meredith showed to you and you to him,—or——”

“Be silent, Mr. Grantham,” exclaimed Margaret, in a tone of suppressed passion. “Dare to say another word such as those which you have just spoken, and, and——” Here her dignity broke down, she was breathless from the effect of the excessive excitement which she was trying to control, and no threat that would not have appeared ludicrously ineffective was forthcoming from her mind at the right moment. She paused, irresolute and panting.

“Margaret,” went on Miles, “I never

suspected you of flirting until I saw you with——”

“Stay!—stop!” cried Margaret, interrupting her companion with startling promptitude. “Do you hear? I will not listen to another word. Sir John Grantham shall know of this, and, and——”

“Margaret, it is true,” burst in Miles, with desperate determination. A frightful possibility had crossed his cowardly mind while Margaret was speaking; but thinking his wisest course would be to take the bull by the horns, he made an effort to hide his fears under a manner of vehement assurance. “Margaret, it is true!” he cried. “Till Meredith came, till I watched your behaviour with him, I understood your manner to me to mean the love that it expressed. Am I now to understand that you have been deceiving me,—that you only gave me encouragement in order that you might have the satisfaction of trampling my heart as a worm beneath your feet?”

“Deceiving you! Gave you encouragement!” returned Margaret, this

time with calm and contemptuous indignation. "Trampling *your* heart!" | Here her sense of the ludicrous almost conquered dignity and anger; but she would not allow her lips to curl even into a smile of contempt. "Mr. Grantham," she continued, with dignified gravity, "you know well enough, you cannot deny that you know, that I have given you no encouragement, that I have not even believed in your pretended affection, that I have escaped from you and your unwelcome attentions whenever I have found it possible, that I have hated you almost as long as I can remember, and have borne with your companionship only for the sake of my friends, Sir John and Lady Grantham, whom I love so well, and to whom I owe so much."

"You have not believed in my affection!" exclaimed Miles, working himself up into a fervour of theatrical passion. "By heaven, then you shall believe in it soon! You shall feel it as a powerful force, subduing your hatred, making you love me, whether you will or no! Margaret, you *shall* love

me, or if you will not love me, still, you *shall* be mine! Every one desires it,—my uncle, my aunt, your mother,—and nothing but your own perversity, and your fancy for a man who does not love you,—for all he found it pleasant to amuse himself with you during a summer holiday,—could keep you from desiring it too.”

Here Margaret’s sense of the ludicrous was irresistibly touched by Miles Grantham’s cool and impertinent conceit. She burst out laughing, and then,—

“In short,” she replied, “no right-minded young woman to whom Miles Grantham should condescend to recommend himself could fail to perceive the eligibility of the offer! And you really think,” she went on, changing her tone, “that when my mother and Sir John and Lady Grantham hear of your conduct to me to day they will still wish——”

“Margaret!” interrupted Miles. He felt that he had gone too far, and this time the intonation of his voice was humbly despairing. “Margaret, forgive me! You

little know how much I love you, how worthy of all honour I deem you to be.”

(“I believe he fancies that he is in a book !” thought Margaret to herself.)

“Perhaps some day” he went on “you will better understand my devotion, and will learn to think more kindly of me! Meanwhile, let this conversation remain a secret between you and me?” He spoke imploringly, for fear and vanity were working busily within him.

“Stop a moment,” returned Margaret; “this must depend entirely upon yourself. Will you promise never again to talk to me on the subject of which you have spoken to day?—never again to speak or look at me in a way which you mean to express nonsense? In that case, I will keep your secret; otherwise, in self-defence, I must tell Sir John of all that has passed to-day.”

“Margaret,” he said, “you are hard upon me,—you are cruel! How can I promise what you ask? I will promise this much, and no more. I will promise that my love shall not annoy you again during the

remainder of my visit at Grantham ; and, after that, who knows how long it may be before we meet again ? It may be a year or more before I return to Grantham ; but through all that time my heart will remain staunch to you, and I shall not relinquish the hope of conquering your cruel repugnance to me ! ”

“ You can please yourself, as to that,” replied Margaret. “ Meanwhile, your secret shall be safe with me, until you cause me to repent my indulgence.” She gave her answer lightly, while her heart bounded gladly at the prospect of a year’s freedom from persecution. What joys might not that year bring forth !

Miles, also, softly heaved a sigh of relief. He was safe !—for Margaret would not break her word, and, despite her want of appreciation, he would quietly work his way, and win the prize yet. His vanity told him it was impossible she could withstand him to the end ; and he had her mother on his side. Yes, with the aid of Mrs. Willoughby and his aunt, whom he had almost entirely

under his thumb, he should surely succeed ! Besides, hitherto Margaret had not believed in his devotion to her ; now he would teach her at the same time to believe in it, and to disbelieve in that of Charles Meredith !

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Margaret arrived at home, she found Lady Grantham and her mother seated together beneath a tree on the lawn.

“Back already, child!” cried Lady Grantham, looking at her watch. “Just dinner-time! I had no idea it was so late. Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Willoughby. Margaret, I have scarcely set eyes on you to-day! Walk with me as far as the avenue. Well, and did you enjoy your ride?”

“Oh yes, thanks,” replied Margaret, quickly. “That is to say, it was pleasant in the pine wood, otherwise it was a little bit hot.”

At the tone of Margaret’s answer, Lady Grantham’s heart sank. She had hoped for great results from this ride.

“Which way did you go?” she asked.

“Oh, past the scene of our last week’s picnic. You have not heard from Mr. Meredith, I suppose, Lady Grantham?”

“Miles heard this morning,” was the answer.

“Oh!” said Margaret, as though the information had been new, and then each silently pursued her opposite thoughts.

“Well, my love, did you enjoy your ride?” was asked again, when Margaret rejoined her mother.

“Oh, it was so awfully hot, mother,” answered Margaret. “What have you been doing? Had any visitors?”

“No one but Alice Craycroft and Lady Grantham. But I want to hear about your ride,” said her mother, rather querulously.

“I wish Alice Craycroft had been in my place!” returned Margaret, laughing.

“Nonsense, Margaret; I am sure by your face that you have something to tell me! Has he spoken?”

“Mamma, please don’t let us talk of Miles,” said Margaret, quickly. “I have really nothing to tell you.”

“You have refused him, I am sure you have refused him! Margaret, you will break my heart!” Here Mrs. Willoughby subsided into a fit of hysterics, which perhaps may have spared her daughter the pain of witnessing the catastrophe of the threatened broken heart!

For a while Margaret was engrossed in restoring and soothing her mother. Then fell night, to be followed by another weary restless morning! Mrs. Willoughby was laid up with one of her worst headaches, and accused her child of having caused it by her wilfulness and want of sympathy; and Margaret was one moment lovingly remorseful, and the next impatiently annoyed by her mother’s querulous and unjust complaints. And her heart aching doubly from the sense of lack of sympathy, she again strove in vain to find any occupation which would divert her mind from her trouble.

She could not get rid of the impression that evil was being worked behind her back, and found herself constantly oppressed by the restless sensation that there must be

something which she might be doing to counteract its effects. Oh, for some one to help her! Oh, for some light to fall upon the dreary darkness! She thought, like many a young girl before her, that no lot could be more wretched than hers. And then, to prove the falsity of this thought, came, from no apparent cause, the re-action of a great flood of joy and hope! After all, her memories were glad enough to make her hopeful! She went to the Hall, in full expectation of hearing that Sir John and Lady Grantham had received a letter from Mr. Meredith, restoring him to their good graces again.

“I suppose you have not heard from Mr. Meredith, Lady Grantham?” once more she asked, apparently in the most accidental and unconcerned manner.

“Miles heard yesterday,” was this time Lady Grantham’s answer. And then a dose composed of Miles’ charms was poured down Margaret’s throat, and again old Nurse Gilling was to be done out of a visit from her darling, because the morning

ended in arrangements for an afternoon expedition, and Margaret was not allowed to escape the pleasure provided for her.

Miles made his appearance, looking like a beaten dog; and his manner towards Margaret was deprecating and mournful. Whenever he approached her, his movements appeared to be asking pardon for the liberty they were taking. He oppressed her all the afternoon with small attentions, in a way which seemed to be saying, "You may crush me, you may despise and hate me, but you cannot prevent my serving you!" And the sensation that he effected in her was an intense desire to crush him, as if he had been a loathsome insect. But as, unfortunately, this desirable object might not and could not be obtained, she had to endure the same kind of irritating persecution daily, during the remainder of Miles' visit at Grantham!

A day or two passed, and then Margaret said again,—

"Have you had any news from Mr. Meredith, by-the-by, Lady Grantham?"

“Miles heard on Thursday,” replied Lady Grantham.

“What is that?” asked Sir John, looking up from a book of which he was turning over the leaves, and catching sight of the weary, wistful face which Margaret had hastily turned away from Lady Grantham’s view. “What is that? And you heard too, did not you, old woman? Surely you saw the letter, childie? it was full of pleasant reminiscences of the Hall and of The Cottage. You were meant to see it, I’ll be bound.”

“My dear, it was only a line, thanking for favours received,” said Lady Grantham, laughing. “If I had supposed that it would have been any gratification to Margaret to see the interesting document, you may be sure I should not have forgotten to show it to her. Miles’ was the principal letter. He read us parts of it, you know.”

“Have you destroyed your note?” asked Sir John, who was suddenly possessed by an impression that between them they were bullying the girl, in a way that he could not permit.

“Oh no, I think not,” said Lady Grantham, feeling in her pocket. “I gave it to you, I believe, and I have not seen it since. Most likely you were the destroyer.”

“That I am sure I was not,” returned her husband. “Oh, ay; here it is, safe in my waistcoat pocket!” and he held it out to Margaret.

It contained little more than what she had already gathered from Sir John Grantham. But there was something in the actual wording, and in the sight of the handwriting, that seemed to bring her comfort. She felt, after reading the letter, as if he were not so far away, and it seemed as though her future meeting with him had become a nearer possibility.

“When you write to him, will you be so kind as to thank him for his note to mamma? And will you tell him that we were very sorry he was obliged to run away in such a hurry, and that we did not see him to say good-bye? Mamma says it is not worth while her writing in return for that note. Writing tires her head,” said Margaret, adding, sigh-

ingly, to herself, "I wish she would let me write for her. And yet, and yet—I don't know that I should dare to do it, even if she would!"

"My dear," replied Lady Grantham, "I put a line into Miles' envelope on Thursday. I always like to answer my letters at once."

In spite of herself, Margaret flushed with vexation.

"Too bad, childie," said the Squire. "You and I knew nothing about it, and were never asked for messages. I'll tell you what, I'll write myself by this very day's post, and you shall send what message you like."

"I'll be hanged if that young prig shall have it all his own way," he added; to himself, as he caught sight of Miles, approaching the group on the terrace walk. "We shall be having the poor child going off into a decline, and lose her altogether, which would be worse than losing her from Grantham Hall! I say, Miles,"—aloud, when his nephew had come up,—“will this same address still find young Meredith?"

"I—I don't know, uncle," answered

Miles. "Are you going to write to him? Perhaps it would be better to wait until I have heard again?"

"Oh, nonsense! of course the letter would be forwarded."

"Oh, no doubt," returned Miles, suddenly changing his tone.

"I must be quick, though," said Sir John, looking at his watch; "it is nearly time for the letters to go."

"I am going down to Darlingster by-and-by, uncle, and can post any letters, if you like. So you need not hurry," called out Miles, as his uncle left the terrace.

"All right, thank you," said the squire, adding to himself, "I'll be hanged if he shall take this one, though, with those lank, ill-favoured claws of his."

The letter was written,—a genial, hearty letter, expressing the general regret at Charles' hasty departure, recommending as speedy a return, and hinting pretty clearly that his society had not been found disagreeable to the inmates of The Cottage. Having completed, folded, and directed it,

Sir John rang the bell, and hearing that the bag had already gone, gave orders that one of the men should take his letter into Darlingster.

It would have been as much as the footman's place was worth if Sir John had known that he had given up the letter to Miles, who, meeting him with it in his hand, had said that he was on the way to Darlingster, and would save him a journey.

CHAPTER VII.

MEANWHILE, Margaret, with a lightened heart, had left the Hall, and was making her way to old Gilling's cottage. As she reached it, the old woman whom she was about to visit was seated in an arm-chair. Her deathlike, furrowed face was half turned from the window. Her brows were knit. Her eyes were fixed. And she was so much engrossed by deep thought that she did not hear when Margaret knocked, or when she gently opened the door. She was muttering indistinctly to herself, and when Margaret called, "Nurse, nurse," she started like one disturbed in sleep, and her mutterings became louder and clearer.

"Ay, ay," so they ran, "the promise went for nothing after we were married; but you'll keep a promise to the dead, and it won't be long now,—it won't be long."

Margaret thought that she was wandering, and going close up to her, she put her hand upon her arm, and said,—

“Nurse, nurse, don’t you know me? Won’t you speak to me?”

Then a change passed over the face. A smile of sunshine chased away the shadows of gloom and anxiety by which it had been darkened, and for a moment the old woman looked as bright and loving as the young girl who was leaning over her.

“Lors, Miss Marget,” she said, drawing the soft little hand caressingly into her own withered ones, “lors, Miss Marget, my darling, that ben’t never you, come to see the old woman at last? I thought you was never coming no more.”

“I have been wanting to come, every day, nurse, but——”

“Ah, I know,” interrupted the old woman. “Miss Marget, you take your old nurse’s advice. Don’t you let that young fellow get his own way with you. He’ll be coming it over you, if you don’t mind what you’re about, and then you won’t find it easy to get

out of the puckle. He's a cunning one, is Mr. Miles ! Ay, I minds of him, that high, a-stealing of the sugar-plums from little miss when he thought no one wasn't looking. But I was even with him, and I'll be even with him again, for all he thinks himself so safe ! ”

“ What are you talking about, nurse ? Mr. Miles and I have nothing to do with each other, now that we are too old to fight about sugar-plums ! What in the world can you have got into your head about Mr. Miles getting his own way with me ? ”

“ Ah, there, Miss Marget, you knows well enough what I means. I means as the young gentleman what is gone off in such hurry is worth a thousand of the other. Don't you listen to any one who tells you he ain't. You knows it well enough. I sees it in the brightness of your eye, and the bloom on your cheek. ”

The old woman was right. That peculiar look for which no expression in words can be found had come into Margaret's face,—that look which follows upon the sudden

touch of an unseen messenger of life and love.

“Well, nurse,” she laughed, “I certainly agree with you in liking Mr. Meredith the best of the two. He is very kind, is not he? You liked him, then?”

“Liked him, Miss Marget! Them must be bad ’uns or odd ’uns that would not like him. You know, Miss Marget, we can always tell when the eye looks true. There’s some eyes what says, as they looks at you, that there’s true gold in the words and in the smiles. There’s other eyes that seems to be always saying that the words and the smiles and the gold itself be all cunning lies, sent by the devil to bring us to foolishness; and them’s Mr. Miles’ eyes. Let him keep his gold to himself, we don’t want of it, to scorch our fingers off.”

“Poor Mr. Miles! You are not fond of him, nurse,” answered Margaret, rejoicing in the sense of sympathy with her pet aversion. “What has he done to you? Was it of him you were talking in your sleep, when you looked so cross, as I came in?”

“Talking?” cried the old woman, in a frightened tone. “Talking, was I? What was I talking, Miss Marget? I don’t mind as I said anything! What did I say, then, Miss Marget?”

“You were asleep, nurse, so of course you don’t remember all the foolish things you were saying about marriage, and promises, and death.”

“Ay, ay, Miss Marget,” returned nurse, while the old, fixed, troubled expression came back to the countenance. “Ay, ay, promises, marriage, death! Marriage, promises, death! It is all that, Miss Marget! It is all that! It won’t be long, now, Miss Marget! It’s the death that’ll make it all right, dearie! Them that’s cunning will find themselves disappointed, and them that’s gone will come back again!”

“Dear nurse, you are dreaming again,” said Margaret, tenderly. “There’s plenty more of life for you on earth yet. We cannot spare you yet awhile.”

“Ay, life, life,” said the old woman musingly. “Miss Marget, do you see yon

chink in the door? I sometimes looks at it till I sees it widen and widen, till it be big enough for a little angel baby what I knowed on earth to come through, and draw me after him into the light, and into the fresh air, and the burden drops off, and I can breathe, like ! ”

The old woman stopped, panting. The excitement which had given her strength for a time, had, in the end, worn her out, and she sank back fatigued, while her face became rigid, and a more deathlike paleness passed over it.

“ You are tired, dear nurse, so I must leave you. Good-bye ; I shall come again soon. ”

“ Soon ?—ay, it must be soon, Miss Margaret ! Promises, death, and marriage, my dearie, that is what it will be, ” she said, looking into the girl’s loving eyes, which were sorrowfully turned on the face of the old nurse, for whom she had so tender an affection. “ Kiss me, kiss me, my lamb, for memory of the days when you were your nurse’s sore heart’s treasure and comfort. ”

So the darling face was pressed close against the lips of the dying woman, and after another lingering gaze, Margaret turned to leave the gardener's cottage.

As she walked home, after this interview with her old nurse, it seemed to her as if she had just awakened from a strange dream,—a dream which had left an impression that was not to be easily shaken off. The words of the old woman continually returned to her mind, giving her a strange and solemn feeling; and yet, at the same time, a sense of new life had come to her. As she thought of nurse's lost baby returning as an angel of life to rid her of the burden, whatever it might be, that was oppressing her heart, she remembered her own loss, her own burden! Charles Meredith's face seemed to come before her again, with the earnest inspired look in its eyes which had made him all at once appear to her so godlike. She pictured him no longer as sadly regretful,—the hope of his life having been destroyed by her word,—but she pictured him given up to an earnest work, and fancied that he was calling upon her to be earnest too. And she

was resolved, with a sudden leap at her heart, that although at a distance, he should be as an angel of life to her, drawing her, as nurse had said, into a clearer, brighter, and purer atmosphere, where she might drop her burden of regret, and breathe and live. After all, he did not need her, his life might be blest without her, and in spirit they might be drawn near together, if only she might be unselfishly given up, as she felt sure he was given up, to the living of a true and earnest life.

“Who knows,” she thought, “but that my unhappy mistake may be overruled for good, for I meant no harm, though it was hateful of me to be so blinded!” Besides, now that Sir John Grantham had written, all might speedily be well. “His letter must surely bring an answer, and,—who knows?—perhaps, perhaps, he may return! At all events I will be patient, and wait, and work! Surely the good that is working, unseen, must be stronger than the evil that is working; so there must be a good ending, there must be light to fall some time.”

After this fashion she mused and resolved.

A thousand words, which had been dropped simply, with no pretension, and which had been carelessly heard by her, now came back to her mind, as so many proofs of a good and noble heart, and seemed to her, as she dwelt on them, replete with a power which might spur her on to be good and noble too.

“What would he say,” she thought, “if he knew that I had not yet been to see that poor little consumptive boy, whom he pitied so much that day that we walked through the village, and saw the poor little tiny thin fellow sitting outside his cottage door, gasping for breath. Poor little Jack! I meant to have gone to see him the next day, but all those drives and picnics put him out of my head. It is an age since I went to the village; and what an immense amount of time I have wasted since the morning he went away! Poor nurse, I might as well have managed to get to her in the mornings. I will not neglect her again. What a fancy she seems to have taken to him.”

CHAPTER VIII.

DURING her sleep that night many quaint and pretty fancies flitted through Margaret's brain. Nurse's face, bright and smiling, was mounted upon Jack's small body, as it flew towards her on angel wings, and drew her into a key-hole which led her into a church-yard covered with rose-trees, where she found herself standing by a grave, which seemed to be her own. Then she heard an anthem sung by a lovely voice, which she felt to be Charles Meredith's voice,—and the words, coming over and over again, and swelling out, and dying away, in such sweet music as she had never heard when awake, were always these, “Promises, marriage, death; promises, death, marriage.” Charles Meredith's eyes, with the earnest look by which she was haunted day and night, were gazing

upon her while the anthem sounded. But suddenly he vanished from her side, and the song was changed into marriage-bells, while Jane came up to her and said, "It's for old nurse, miss ; they are to be married, she and Mr. Meredith." She awoke with a start at the seeming words. The church bell was tolling solemnly, and Jane was standing by her bedside.

"Jane," she said "what is the matter ? What is the the bell tolling for ? Why do you look so grave ?"

"It is time for you to get up, miss," replied Jane, evading the question, while she retreated to the bedroom door. "I brought up your hot water half an hour ago."

"Can it be for poor little Jack ?" thought Margaret, her heart sinking sadly, as she arose and went to her dressing-room. "And to think that I never went to see him again !"

On her way downstairs, when she was dressed, she met Jane, who said to her,—

"Miss Margaret, Gilling would be glad if you would go and see him as soon as you can."

“Where is he?”

“At home, miss. He has not been here to work yet. His wife was taken worse, miss, last night.”

“Oh, Jane,” cried Margaret, suddenly, it was for nurse that the bell was tolling! And then came a rush of grief across her heart, and she burst into tears.

When she went to see the old man, she found him seated in the chair in which his wife had been sitting while she talked with her on the previous day. His hands were pressed tightly upon his knees. His head was bowed. And there was a look of grief on his face such as Margaret had never seen before. A young man was standing near him.

“Father, here’s Miss Margaret come to see you,” he said, as Margaret advanced silently to the chair, and stood by the old man’s side.

“Eh? What, Miss Marget, be you here? Ah, you be too late—you be too late!”

And then he relapsed into silence, while the look of hard, bitter grief, which had for

a moment softened, crept back again over his face.

“Jane told me that I might come to you, Gilling,” said Margaret, gently.

“To be sure, to be sure,” returned the old man; “she was always terribly glad to see you! Ah, she won’t see no one no more!” And then, again absorbed by the loneliness of his grief, he seemed to ignore the presence of Margaret.

“I will go away, and come another time,” said Margaret to the son; “I only disturb him now. I am glad he has you, Joe. When did you come? Were you in time?”

“Only just, miss. I didn’t like the account as I got from father, and missis give me leave to come off at once, and I got here last night. I found poor mother terrible bad, to be sure.

“But she was conscious?”

“Oh yes, miss, and asking for me, just as I come in. ‘Thank God,’ she says, and then I seemed in hopes that she was a bit better for a while. But soon it all come over her again, and she clutched hold of

father, and seemed beside herself, like, and said, ‘ You promise, father,—you promise?’ and then they looked at me, and father whispered, and I come away; and when I come back again I found mother’s face looking so bright, like, if you believe me, miss; I thought I was in heaven, all of a sudden. She just turned her eyes on me, and then on father, and then——”

Here the poor fellow fairly broke down, and sobbed like a child.

“ God comfort you,” said Margaret, softly.” You must think of that bright look on her face, that you may feel as if you were in heaven with her.”

“ Ay, and it’s there still, miss! Father wants for you to see her. Will you please to come up, now, miss? Father says as no one hardly, but you, ben’t good enough to see her. You and parson, doctor and Squire. Mr. Miles come, and was terrible kind, and wanted to see her. But father didn’t half like it. He did not seem to think as it was conformable, because, you see, miss, mother hadn’t used to be partial

to Mr. Miles. I can't seem to account for why she didn't use to like him, so terrible kind as he've always been. It seemed a'most as if she'd somehow got a cross in her mind about him. Ah, if she could only have known how kind he was when he come in this morning, giving father money for the funeral and all. It wasn't no use father saying as he would not have it, Mr. Miles wouldn't take no refusal."

"Mr. Miles has been to see you already, then?"

"Yes, come almost immediate,—a'most before the bell began to toll; and father's been like this, a'most beside himself, seeming as if he see'd nothing and heard nothing on earth, ever since he was here. He looked scared like,—seemed as if the money scorched his fingers,—said as it wasn't respectful to the dead that he should have taken it. I a'most fancied once," here Joe lowered his voice mysteriously, "that he must have seen mother's ghost, he started so and looked so strange with his eyes; bless you, you might have thought he had

stolen the money! And I'll warrant me there ben't a honester man in all the world!"

"I am sure there isn't," put in Margaret.

"Goes on a-muttering about his promise,—I know nothing about that; but I knows there ben't a faithfuller man than father to be found nowhere."

"I'm sure there is not," said Margaret, "and of course he cannot forget all your dear mother's fancies and wishes. She disliked Mr. Miles, you say, for some reason?"

"Yes miss; she didn't like none of them. Bless you, she hadn't a good word to say for my mistress, hadn't poor mother, for all she've been so kind to me,—a'most took me off father's hands when he married poor mother, the only mother I ever knowed anything about,—give me my schooling, you know, miss, and is a good mistress to me now, and says we shan't none of us never want for nothing, she and Mr. Miles. She be as good as her son. I can't say no more. But poor mother, she knew no better. She be in heaven, if ever any one was. As

good a mother to me, she was, as if I'd been her own son twenty times over! Will you come up and see her, miss?"

"I think,—I think,—I think I had better not," began Margaret; but seeing a pained look pass over the young man's face, she reluctantly rose to follow him upstairs.

"Maybe you'll be able to rouse him, afterwards," he said, stopping to look anxiously round at the old man. "I can't rouse him nohow! He said as he wanted to see parson, had something to say to him, partic'ler; but when he come to him, bless you, he hadn't nothing to say to him, for all parson told him it was his duty not to rebel against the decree of the Almighty. Then he wanted to speak to doctor, but he hadn't nothing to say to him, neither; and for all he give him a mixture, he've gone on in the same way ever since. Then I tried what telling him about mistress would do, and how comfortable I was, and how many suits of clothes master give me; but, bless you, it only seemed to make him worse. He looked

scared like, as though he'd seen the devil, and called out for mother to come and help him. Father, Miss Marget's going upstairs."

"Eh? what do you say, Joe?" said the old man, looking round. "Be Miss Marget going upstairs." God bless you, Miss Marget. She'd be pleased for you to come."

Margaret's heart beat as she approached the door, through which she was to be ushered, for the first time, into the mysterious presence of death! But as she drew near to the bed, and gazed at the beautiful marble face,—smooth and calm and smiling, with a smile such as that which the countenance of a sleeping child might have worn,—her sensations were very different from those which she had anticipated. Grief, anxiety, fear and hope, all seemed to have been suddenly hushed to rest. The recollection of her dream of the night before passed quickly through her mind, bringing with it a strange thrill, and all its scenes seemed to have been

brought into sudden life. But it appeared as though even her memories had been transported into another world, and as if she had no longer anything to do with the outward things of this one. An angel voice from the land of her dream seemed to be saying, "He is not here! He is risen!" And then, as though in a rush of music through her heart, came the words, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." For a while she had stood silent, and now, as she looked up at Joe, it scarcely seemed to her as if it were her own voice in which she spoke the words,—

"She is not here! She is risen!"

To Joe it seemed indeed as if an angel had spoken; so bright, so almost heavenly, had the expression of her sweet face been, as she raised it to his while she gave the comforting message.

"Say that to father, miss," he said, as soon as his sobs would allow him to speak. "I seems in hopes as it might arouse him."

So together they went down to the old man.

“I have seen her, Gilling,” she whispered. “How peaceful and beautiful it is! But it is not she! One feels that! One feels that she is more peaceful, more beautiful, in the life into which she has risen!”

The old man looked up, while a softer tone came over his face.

“Say it, miss, say them words,” implored Joe.

“It was while we were looking on at it, you know, Joe, that we said, ‘She is not here! She is risen!’” replied Margaret, in a hushed voice. And then tears came into her eyes. “Risen into life, not into distance,” she added to herself; but the bereaved ones did not catch her thought, and before she could speak again,—

“No; she ben’t here,” returned the old man,—“she ben’t here,—she ben’t here, and I suppose one had ought to try to be thankful as she’s up there. Do you think, miss, she cares to know, up there, what we does here? Do you think she’d be pleased, miss, if we do what she wants, and if we keeps our promises?”

“I am sure she would, Gilling; I think it would please her to see us trying to be good.”

“And will it trouble her if we breaks our promises, and does things as ain’t agreeable to her?”

“I don’t know,” said Margaret, quickly, looking puzzled; and then a new look, that was grave and bright at once, passing into her countenance, “HE is grieved when we do wrong,” she murmured, musingly, half to herself, thus giving utterance to a fragment of the thought of her heart.

“Eh, Miss Marget? Would she care, up there? Would it trouble her?” put in the old man, impatiently.

“She must care more than ever,” returned Margaret. “Perhaps untruth and wrong doing would bring a shadow so that she could not be made glad by seeing you!”

“And if things was all going contrary, and Joe was cast off, and we was to be hooted at, and to come to the work’us, would there come a shadow so that she could not see us Miss Marget?” asked Gilling.

Margaret began to think that the old man must indeed be beside himself.

“ I hope nothing of the sort will happen,” she replied. “ If it should, perhaps God will send her to comfort you.”

“ Do you think so, Miss Marget ? ”

“ At least, you feel sure that He will help you whatever comes ? ”

“ Yes, miss, yes,—I knows that. I know as th’ Almighty ’ll help me. Yes,—I must do it! I must do it! I shouldn’t mind if it wasn’t for he,” and he turned his eyes in the direction of his son, shaking his head and speaking softly, as though to himself.

Margaret’s heart was full as she left the cottage door. She went to the village, thinking sadly, and pondering many things. But in spite of herself, glad and hopeful feelings leapt up through her heart, and seemed all the brighter for their contrast with her sad and heavy thoughts. After all, she was young, and life was full for her of delightful possibilities !

She called herself cold and heartless, but do what she would she could not stay the

flow of natural spirits, which vexed her by its seeming incongruity. Her first visit in the village was to little Jack, whom she found leaning back luxuriously in an easy chair, with a ball and a top by his side and a coloured picture-book on his knee. He looked up eagerly as she approached, and then heaved a sigh, and blankly puckered up his face.

"I thought p'raps it was the kind gentleman come back," he said, as Margaret drew near.

"And you are disappointed?"

"Yes, ma'am.

"And who is the kind gentleman?" asked Margaret, her heart beating fast.

"The kind gentleman what give me these. He be gone away. When be he coming back?"

"Who is he? Don't you know his name? Is he the clergymen?"

"No."

"The doctor?"

"No. It be Mr. Meredy. He be gone, and he never come to say good-bye to me," said the child, plaintively.

“And was he very kind to you?”

“He was terribly kind, and he promised to come and see me again.”

“Did he often come to see you?”

“A’most every day, and he telled me funny stories, and give me toys and books,—and I wants him!”

And the poor little fellow closed his eyes and sighed wearily, while he pitifully puckered up his little wizened face.

“Perhaps he will come back again, dear,” said Margaret, her eyes lighting up gladly as she spoke. “Perhaps I shall hear about him soon! If I do, I will come and tell you the news.”

The child’s face brightened wonderfully.

“When do you think he will be here? Do you think he will come and see me directly he gets here, ma’am?” he cried, eagerly.

“You must not be disappointed if he does not come soon, Jack,” answered Margaret; “but I will try to send a message to him from you, if you like. What shall it be?”

“Dunno; but he must come *now*!”

said the boy, plaintively. "I heard mother say as I was like to die soon, and I must see Mr. Meredy first. I doesn't want to die. They say as God will be kind to me in heaven ; but I don't think as He can be kinder nor Mr. Meredy, what give me this chair."

"But God made Mr. Meredy kind to you, dear," said Margaret.

"Did He? Then I love God, and I think as He'll send Mr. Meredy back to me!"

"I hope so, dear. Good-bye, I must go now. Shall I come again?"

"Yes, soon, please ma'am. You be like him! You have a kind look, just like him, on your face."

"Then I love God, and I think as He'll send Mr. Meredy back to me!" These words of little Jack's echoed again and again, like a lovely song, through Margaret's heart, while she walked about the village and home to her mother, and they made her feel unreasonably hopeful,—hopeful and glad in the almost certain expectation that the post would speedily bring a letter from Mr.

Meredith to Sir John Grantham. But again and again, in the midst of her hopeful mood, she remembered, with a sorrowful sinking of her spirits, the grief of the village, and scolded herself for heartlessness.

As she was crossing the field in which old Gilling's cottage stood, she observed Joe Gilling standing outside the little wicket gate. He came near, and touching his hat, "I seems in hopes as father's a bit easier, miss," he said. "Mr. Miles come in again, and was terrible kind, to be sure. But when he went, father took on bad again,—seemed so strange I was a'most afraid he would have gone daft altogether; but by-and-by he seemed to get more quiet and natural-like. I heard him say as he'd let it 'bide till we had got the funeral over comfortable. 'She won't think as I am going to break my promise, because I puts off a bit,' he says. And then I falls to talking of how pleased mother'd be if she knew how decent the funeral was to be, and that Mr. Miles was going to give him a fine new black coat and all; and so I got him to cheer up a bit."

Margaret wondered to herself, as she continued her journey homewards.

“What can this secret be that seems to be troubling old Gilling’s conscience?” she thought. “And what makes Miles so marvellously charitable all of a sudden? He is certain to be up to some mischief whenever he pretends to be particularly good! It always was so when we were children.”

CHAPTER IX.

MARGARET'S first thought on waking the next morning was, "Perhaps there may be a letter from Mr. Meredith;" her second brought the sorrowful recollection that the old nurse who had been as a mother to her in her childhood was dead!

Her first visit was to the Hall, after which, —her heart sick with disappointment, for there was no letter,—she wandered towards old Gilling's cottage, to sympathise with the mourners there, and then on to the village to be soothed by poor little Jack's loving praise of her friend.

On the following day, again the stillness of her thoughts of death was disturbed,—first by hope and then by disappointment. For again there was no letter.

Then came the day of the funeral; and

she told herself that no earthly hopes and fears, no fond regret or vain longing, must be permitted to break in upon its solemn calm. When the presence of death seemed to be shadowing all the earth, it would surely be sacrilege to dream of earthly bliss ! When glimpses of an unseen life “ behind the veil ” opened, as it seemed, from time to time upon her vision, could it be right to care for the life or death of hopes connected with earth ? When others were in sore grief, was it not mean and selfish to let her mind dwell on anxieties or hopes of her own ?

Thus musing, she strolled slowly through the wood, and across the boundary line dividing the grounds of the cottage from those of Grantham Hall. But on catching sight of Sir John Grantham, her quiet musings suddenly ceased, and while her heart gave a great bound, she hurried forward to meet him, and in a moment was raising to his, unconsciously wistful and inquiring eyes. Something tenderly pitiful in his face seemed to stay on her lips the question that she had meant to ask.

“Childie,” he said, after a minute’s pause, while he caressingly stroked her face with his big hand,—“childie, I begin to think it would be as well for you and me to try to forget all about that gay young man who made believe to be so fond of us t’other day. He don’t seem to be in a hurry to write to us, or to care much to get our letters, and, from all I can learn, he appears to be enjoying his absence from us fully as much as he enjoyed our company.”

“Perhaps,” answered Margaret, as quietly as she could, “perhaps your letter has not reached him.”

“So I said to Lady Grantham this morning; but it came out that the young gentleman had written to Miles since his receipt of my letter, and had sent a message which Miles had forgotten to deliver,—a cool sort of message enough,—to the effect that he was much obliged for my letter, and hoped to write when he had more leisure. And how do you suppose his busy days to be occupied? In no less arduous a manner than dancing, and picnic-ing, and love-making, and all the

rest of it! Perhaps Miles will indulge you with a reading of the lively account if you ask him."

"Miles!" contemptuously cried Margaret, with a reproachful glance into Sir John Grantham's face,—“Miles!” And then, making some hasty excuse, she turned away from him, and flew, with passionate footsteps, to hide herself in the deepest shade of her favourite wood.

With a grave smile, Sir John Grantham gazed after her until she was out of sight. “Miles!” he said aloud, to himself, mimicking her scornful tone of voice. “Ay, Miles! Miss Margaret. But you are like all the women,” so his thoughts continued to run, “doubting where it pleases your prejudice to doubt, and believing where your fancy bids you believe! Women, did I say? Pshaw! I have been as big a fool myself as the silliest of them all! That stranger lad took my fancy, and I chose all at once to transform him into a fancied paragon of perfection, and exalt him into the image in which I would have chosen to see my own son formed,

had he lived to grow up ; while for my poor nephew,—because his tastes do not happen to chime in with those of his boorish old uncle,—because he offends my taste,—because, forsooth, his features take their pattern rather from those of madam than from those of my poor brother,—because,—nay,

“ The reason why I cannot tell,
I do not like thee, Dr. Fell ! ”

This is the long and short of it, I believe. But we must learn to conquer our prejudices, you and I, Miss Margaret ; we must learn to see merit where we are assured that merit lies ; and who knows but that on some happy wedding-day, when our eyes have been fully opened, we may look back laughingly on all our follies, and be ‘ happy ever after ? ’ Poor child, poor child,” concluded the baronet, in an audible murmur,—“ poor child ! Well, it is the way of the world. Heigho ! we have all had our dreams and our disappointments, in our time, and the grief passes away like the joy, and we almost forget that it has ever been ! Forget, do we ? Forget ? Nay ! not

on this side the grave, whatever we may do on the other ! ”

Margaret, meanwhile, was sobbing her heart out in her hidden corner. It was not that she for an instant believed in her lover's fickleness. Had this been her belief, not a sob, not a tear, would have been allowed to escape her. But her trust in Charles Meredith was not to be so easily shaken. Even before the memorable evening on which her heart, as it were, had been allowed to feel the touch of his, and had been inspired with the knowledge that she loved him, her woman's instinct had told her that he was true to the core. And now, she could almost sooner have doubted the evidence of her own senses than have lost faith in the reality of his love. She was not even troubled by the thoughts that the coming years would bring changes, that she had no right to expect him to be constant to her, when she had told him that she did not love him, that it would be only natural for him to teach himself to forget her, and to learn to love another. She did not think of change. She did not look into the

future. She only felt that the present was utterly dark and dreary : and the hopes that she had been cherishing had been swept away so suddenly by the baronet's hasty words, that, in her youthful inexperience, it seemed to her that she could never, never, rise again into happiness. She realised, all in a moment, that he whom she loved best in all the world was far away out of her reach, that all her chances of hearing about him were over, that all possibility of letting him know that she returned his love was at an end ! Miles might be telling a thousand untruths about her, which she would never find any means of refuting, and Charles Meredith, unsuspecting of deceit, believing the false representations, might be thinking of her as a heartless flirt ; but no, she could not dream of him as harbouring a bitter thought of her, she could only picture him with the look of deep sorrow in his face which had so often haunted her sleeping and waking dreams, since the night on which she had seen him last. She could only picture him in sore, sore grief, lonely, and far out of the reach of her sym-

pathy. Oh, to be by his side but for one moment ! Oh, to be able to comfort him, even for an instant ! In the agony of her longing and her dreariness, she cried aloud, “ Oh God ! oh God ! I cannot, cannot bear it ! ” The summer breeze and the buzzing insects seemed to be repeating her cry, and she failed to hear the still small Voice, which was surely murmuring in the depths of her spirit the words, “ I will be with you ! ” Her passionate heart was so full of its woes that she did not remember that a loving Messenger was by her side, ready to carry to him she loved the sympathy she longed to give. So her tears and sighs obtained for her no relief.

Suddenly the church bell began to toll !

Margaret had forgotten all about poor old nurse, the village sorrow, and the coming funeral ! And now, as she roused herself, and set out, mechanically, on her walk to the church, it seemed to her, in her egoism, that the sorrow even of the chief mourners on the occasion was easy, was almost nothing, in comparison with

the one by which her own heavy heart was absorbed. The old woman had long been failing, and now was at peace! Her husband would soon join her. Her stepson had the world before him, and would find a thousand new interests, a thousand joys, to beguile him from his grief! "At least," she thought, "their grief is a gentle one and full of consolation; they know where she is, and look forward to seeing her again!"

Yet soon she found herself tenderly and regretfully remembering the old nurse, looking, in fancy, once more upon the kind old face, and hearing again the strangely-spoken farewell words; and, as in her dream of a few nights back, the bell seemed to be slowly tolling out the poor old woman's deathsong, "Promises, marriage, death; promises, death, marriage." She ceased to think! The words in her memory, rising and falling with the solemn music to which she had unconsciously set them, appeared to be lulling her mind into a sort of death-like stupor.

But suddenly the glorious verse, "I am the Resurrection and the Life!" uttered in the vicar's clear, sonorous tones, struck upon her ear, and brought to her heart a momentary touch of life and light.

"The Resurrection and the Life!" Yes, not only was there an unseen life for the dead old woman, but there was One, The Life Himself, in Whom dead hopes, a lost love, absent friends, all might live; all might be found again!

Then the shadow of death came over her once more, and, wearied out by the intensity of her feeling, she passed in dull apathy through the wonderful Burial Service, looking with almost absent pity upon the bowed figure of the sorrowing husband, accusing herself, secretly, of heartlessness, and dreaming, in spite of this self-accusation, that if Charles Meredith were standing and kneeling by her, a sorrowful season would be transformed, for her, into a season of transcendent joy.

The service over, she sauntered slowly homewards by the fields. When she got

to the meadow in which Gilling's house stood, she caught sight of some one just going in at the cottage door, and in another moment Joe came out at the little garden gate.

“Thank you, miss,” he said, as Margaret drew near. “Father was terribly pleased to see you at the funeral,—showed such respect and all; and did any one good to hear the neighbours say as you looked so haggard, and seemed to be taking on so, a'most as if it had been your own mother. I'm a-going after parson for father. He seems to be took with a desire to see parson again; still got something partic'ler on his mind as he wants to be rid of. It 'll be best for him to have out with it; but I didn't like to leave him alone, so as Mr. Miles was coming by, he said as he'd stay with him a bit.”

“A nice person, Miles, to have to comfort you in grief!” said Margaret to herself, with a grim smile, as Joe walked on. And in spite of her private trouble, she found herself wondering, with some degree of

interest, what old Gilling's secret burden could be, and thinking, with a kind of fear of she knew not what, about Miles Grantham's pretended kindness to him.

"What can he want with the poor old man?" she wondered. "He is certain to be up to some sort of mischief, wherever he is, or whatever about."

Instinctively, she turned in at the little wicket gate. Miles was speaking in loud tones to suit the old gardener's deafness, and Margaret caught the words,—

"He is a fine youth. It would be a pity to spoil his prospects," and then followed a feeble murmur from the old man, followed by Miles' answer,

"Ah, but she would be wiser now. She loved your son as well as you do, Gilling, and she would not wish you to break an old promise for a new one,—and all for no good! Where is the use of taking up old troubles that have been forgotten long ago? There, this will keep you in decent black for a long time to come."

"No, no, Mr. Miles; she had always used

to tell me as I was too fond of dross," feebly remonstrated the old man.

The conversation was only partially heard by Margaret, but as she glanced inadvertently through the open window, she saw the old gardener's eyes turned, half sadly, half eagerly, on a little heap of gold that lay on the table before him. Her knock was answered by Miles, who, as she entered, said, in a tone of affected jocularity,—

"Here is Gilling quarrelling with his bread and butter, Margaret, you must come and say what you can, to try to keep up his heart. Gilling, here is Miss Margaret, so I'll leave you now."

"Eh? What, Miss Marget, be that you?" said Gilling, looking up with a softened face, and pushing away the money. "Ah, she was always glad to see you! So you've come to see the old man, and have a talk about her what's gone? There, take your money, Master Miles, and be off with you."

"Good-bye, Gilling, but I shall be hurt if you don't keep the money. I am going

away, soon, you know, and perhaps I shall not see you any more."

And then he went, while Gilling, with a sigh, half of trouble, half of relief,—almost satisfaction,—glanced at the gold on the table before him.

In a few minutes Joe came back.

"Parson 'll be here directly, father," he said.

The old man shuffled uneasily on his chair.

"Don't know that I want anything of parson," he said, rather peevishly. "What do you go off in such a hurry to call parson for? Any one's best left alone when he's in trouble. No one can't do him no good. There's Mr. Miles been here, a-bothering of me. I'm sure I don't want his gold. Put it away, somewhere, Joe, will yer? Miss Marget, I forgot yer," he added, as Margaret rose to take her leave. "I'm not rightly myself to-day."

"Something odd, something that I can't make out!" thought Margaret. "But what does it matter to me?" Presently she

came across Mr. Bowles, the vicar, walking with Miles Grantham. He was a big, broad man, with a genial, easy-going expression of countenance. They were walking together very energetically, and did not see Margaret. The clergyman was apparently much impressed by some remark of Miles'.

"He is a queer old fellow, I know," he was saying, as Margaret passed within ear-shot. "I have never been able to make head or tail of him. I should not wonder if you are right in what you say."

"He is harmless, poor old buffer," at present, returned Miles; "but I am convinced there is a screw loose somewhere. I shall be curious to know what he says to you. He talks as if he was oppressed by some secret crime, and his son is convinced that it is all a delusion. His wife seems to have been down upon him about his love of money, and this weighs so much upon his mind that I could hardly get him to accept a trifle from me just now. I feel to owe him something for——"

"What business has Miles to interfere

about old Gilling? Why cannot he let him alone? I suppose he wants to gain a character for benevolence with the vicar," thought Margaret, charitably, as she moved aside, out of hearing, and then her thoughts returned to her own heart's trouble.

The next day old Gilling took to his work again. He talked to Margaret, as usual, about his garden concerns, carried about with him his wonted expression of countenance, and appeared to have buried in some secret corner of his being both his grief and the burden that had seemed to be troubling his conscience.

"Parson cheered him up a bit," said Joe, in answer to Margaret's inquiry. "He has a cheerful way with him, and he told father as he'd best let things 'bide as they were, and not be bothering hisself. So he's seemed more natural, like, since, as if he'd sort of put a cloud away from him. I heerd him a-muttering as parson must know best, and likely mother'd know better than she did now, and would see as things as has been done couldn't be undone all in a

minute, partic'ler where there's other people to think of besides oneself. I don't know what it's all about, Miss Margaret, and I ain't going to trouble myself to find out. It ain't no business of mine, so that I sees father sort of like his natural self again, and taking heart a bit, before I leaves him."

Neither, Margaret thought, was it any business of hers; and she soon let the matter pass away from her remembrance.

CHAPTER X.

LIFE in Darlingster and its neighbourhood now went quietly on, without much outward stir or change. Joe's leave of absence from service came to an end. Gilling gradually subsided into his old accustomed placid self,—an indefatigable, energetic gardener, who might have been supposed never to have known grief or anxiety, excepting such as bore reference to the shrubs and plants amidst which he moved and worked.—Miles Grantham left the Hall. Alice Craycroft's almond-shaped eyes grew more pensive. Summer days gradually waned away into autumn ones. Picnics and lawn dances ceased. The postman still paced daily backwards and forwards between Darlingster and Grantham, but brought no letter that materially affected the current of ex-

istence at the Hall or at The Cottage. Mrs. Willoughby continued to be troubled by headache, to be regularly more or less languid, and nervously irritable, in the mornings, to be irregularly excited into energy by some whim or fancy, towards the end of the day. And Margaret was quietly learning to adapt herself to the alteration which a few summer weeks had wrought in her own individual inner life. Little difference was marked in her by others. She read, worked, drew, played, attended tenderly upon her mother, visited the poor, laughed and talked, and rambled about the woods, just as she had done before. Perhaps she now preferred those employments which occupied her hands, and left her thoughts free. Perhaps she oftener now appeared to be in a hurry to shut up her book and wander restlessly out of doors. Perhaps Lady Grantham would oftener have occasion to remark, disapprovingly,—

“My darling, you look fagged; you tire yourself to death with those everlasting

poor people. I must really send for Miles, to beguile you on to 'Hero's' back!"

Or Sir John Grantham would vex her by looking at her anxiously, and then saying, lightly,—

"She is getting 'pale and interesting,' this girl! Mrs. Willoughby; you will have to send her away into the gay world, to bring back some roses."

Or, worst of all, Mrs. Willoughby herself would distress her, by exclaiming peevishly,—

"My dear Margaret, it is all very well to be benevolent; but you appear to me to have taken up your abode in the village for good and all, and to have forgotten that home duties come first! I wanted some lavender drops this morning, but there was no one to fetch them for me, and my head was so bad that I could not get up from the sofa to ring the bell for Jane." Or, "I am not complaining, my dear, but I should like to have you a little more with me!" Or it might be, "My love, you are looking very sentimental; I wish I could see you improving your mind a little more. You

seem quite to have given up working at your history or German ! ”

But, on the whole, they let the girl go pretty much her own way, and saw little reason to disturb themselves about her at present. There were times when her high animal spirits got the better of all else, and her natural merriment was free and unrestrained. And at those other times, when her heart was weary of present things, and was dejected through regretful wanderings into the happy past, there was no one to see the pathetic expression of hopeless longing that would steal over her face, while her eyes seemed to be gazing far, far away into the indefinite, as though in search of something which they might never find. But there were better, truer times than these. There were moments when the indefinite was changed into the infinite, where the eyes of her imagination seemed to find a bright and peaceful resting-place. There she saw visions of that which was and was to be, and heard angel-whisperings, which assured her that ‘love which knows no earthly

close' may obtain in a pure and immortal world full and unceasing satisfaction.

From the heights of her pure dreamland, she sometimes came down to common life, with her countenance transfigured into a strange beauty, which, if Sir John Grantham chanced to come across her, caused him to glance at her with uneasy admiration. "She looks as if she were ready for her wings," he would say to himself, and were about to fly away up there, where the other bright ones are gone to, out of my dull sight!"

Margaret's inner life, however, was not all made up of sad musings and bright imaginings. Sorrow such as hers stirs up the mind to its depths, and sets to work a thousand dark and difficult questions. Who was to answer these questions for the lonely girl? Who was to bring back to her her former careless and contented trust in things which had been to her as a distant prospect, adding, by its vague and shadowy beauty, to the pleasure of her bright and happy life? There was no one to whom she could speak,—no one who could answer

these 'infant cryings in the dark!'—no one but the One who finally replied to Job: the One who at once justified and reproved him for his complaints, who touched him with the reality for which he had craved, and made him understand the secret workings of His just and loving might, amidst the seeming success of injustice, pain, and evil. Perhaps he would also bring relief to this poor desolate child. Perhaps He, Who, in spite of His love and power, had suffered her to feel the bitter pain of human loss and absence, and had permitted it to arouse that bitterest agony, the dread lest Divine love had no existence in reality,—perhaps He would Himself bring the blessed remedy. Perhaps in His answer, and in the touch of his loving hand, she would learn that, amidst all uncertainties, He, at least, was sure,—He at least understood the peculiarities of her trouble,—that He was her Guide, and the Guide of her absent friend,—that, amidst the dark and evil deeds that others were working in the world, He was working good,—that, amidst her own mistakes and follies, He was work-

ing wisdom. Perhaps when things seemed darkest for herself and others, she would still hear his voice telling her that 'good' would be the 'final goal of ill.'

As has been said, her great relief, when oppressed by restless longings, was in active work. The mere movement, the having something to do that had no reference to her trouble, and that yet did not force her thoughts away from it, soothed her in spite of herself. Then while she was passing from cottage to cottage, certain familiar words suddenly darted into her mind, with a new and sweet meaning. 'Be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your work is not in vain in the Lord.' This last verse of the lesson in the Burial Service had caught her wandering attention on the day of old nurse's funeral, and had seemed to her to give but cold and dreary comfort. "Work, lonely work! How was it to be borne! What good was there in it?" So had she, wearily, rather felt than thought! For all life at the moment had appeared

to her sinking heart to be nothing better than a useless blank. But now, with the remembrance of the words, there seemed to come to her a mysterious touch, as it were, from afar, to tell her that her work was not in vain,—to tell her that it was done in unison with one at a distance, and was linking her life with his in the unseen eternal world. In fancy she saw again the steadfast, earnest look that had thrilled through her, as though it had been the gaze of a prophet who was rapt into the Invisible, and was hearing the message that called him to fulfil a noble mission.

Again she seemed to perceive, as though for the first time, that this seer was godlike ; and, as though inspired by him with redoubled strength, she went about her work with fresh life and energy. Must she be accused of idolatry and earthly motive? If it were so, at least her thought was pure and unworldly, and was leading the way to a higher and holier sense of spiritual union with One unseen. And gradually she lost herself in the interests and concerns of others. The sym-

pathy which had been somewhat forced and absent, grew to be hearty and genuine.

Her chief interest was poor little Jack; but it was an interest which was slowly fading away from her, with the poor little boy's feeble life. Day by day he grew thinner, the lines about his face became sharper, his eyes grew larger and brighter, his breathing became weaker and more painful. But the winter went by, and left him still alive; the bleak winds of March, the April showers, and the May blossoms came and went, and left him lingering still. And it was not until the hot days of August drew round again that the messenger called him, and he passed away.

Poor little Jack! Unconsciously, he had done a work in his short life. He had soothed, softened, and strengthened one in great distress. He had been to her as an angel from the far-away world of her love. He had given her tangible proof, if proof were needed, that he whom she loved best in the world had a good, and gentle, and noble heart. It was a proof which she could

bring forward, she liked to think, if others chose to dispute the fact. Therefore, although little Jack may have been an unimportant mover in the scenes of Margaret Willoughby's life, it would be ungrateful and unfair to leave him altogether out of its story. Each day throughout the autumn on which Margaret had gone to visit the sick boy, he had asked,—

“Have you heard from Mr. Meredy? Is he coming?”

And long after Margaret had ceased expecting to hear or see anything of her friend, the child had continued to ask the same question.

“Not yet, Jack,” she had answered,—
“not yet; we must be patient. God will let him come to us in good time.”

But as the boy's end had seemed to be drawing nearer, Margaret's reply had become different.

“Perhaps, Jack,” she had answered, often with a choking voice—“perhaps you will find him where you are going.”

And then Jack's face had brightened, and

he had talked eagerly of all that he would do in the fair home to which he was going,—how he would teach the “angel-children” to love Mr. Meredy as he did, and would sing songs with them about the kind things that the good gentleman had done for him when he was on earth. For Margaret had told the boy many an “angel story,” and had tried to make the mysterious land to which he was hastening seem to him real, and bright, and loving, that he might not fear to find himself a stranger there. But tremblingly and sadly had she listened to his gentle talk. Oh, that she, too, might go!—that she, too, might pass away into that pure and loving home,—that she might find him there, at rest! So had she sometimes wearily sighed. At last, one day,—it was a day in August, a burning day, with scarcely a breath of air, the gardens brilliant with flowers, the corn-fields rich with their golden harvest, the world looking beautiful and happy,—Margaret was on her way to the death-bed of little Jack. A thousand thoughts were busy in her mind. A thou-

sand feelings were making her heart beat quickly, and were half dimming her eyes. A thousand voices seemed to be whispering to her, through the still atmosphere, of by-gone days, and scenes of the past rose up vividly before her eyes. It was the anniversary of the day on which she had last seen Charles Meredith! Should she ever see him again on earth? She seemed to be with him in spirit, as she entered Jack's sick room. She found the dying child changed indeed,—but with his face not one whit the less bright than it had been in his stronger days; it even almost seemed to her, as she looked at it, to be shining with a strange unearthly light.

“Miss Marget,” he said, none the less eagerly for the painful gasps which interrupted his speech—“Miss Marget, I've been a-thinking,—seems to me as I'm a'most sure to find Mr. Meredy there, for you says as it's because Jesus loves me, as He's coming to fetch me, and I don't think as He could have done without Mr. Meredy all this time! It's been bad enough for me, but it

won't matter soon. Don't you think as He must have got him there by this time? "

The question was asked wistfully, and with a momentary touch of painful doubt. And Margaret checked her fast-rising tears, and smiled a smile which might have been caught from the world to which Jack was hastening, and tenderly touched the little thin cold hand and whispered soothingly, "He will make it all right for you, dear."

Then Jack looked quite happy again.

"I'll tell Him about you, Miss Marget," he said; "I'll tell Him as you talked about Him, and how good you was, and as you'll come soon. I'll tell them both about you." And for the moment Margaret was able to enter fully into his gladness, and it almost seemed to her that she was being drawn with him into a heaven such as children ween of, 'behind the veil, behind the veil.'

As he finished speaking, he sank back, and weariedly closed his eyes, and with a happy smile upon his face he fell into a half-conscious doze. From time to time he

murmured, now the name of Mr. Meredith, then a holier name, and it seemed as if the two were confused together in his mind. Margaret remained in the still room for a few minutes, and then took her leave, while the little boy's mother and sister sat by the bedside, to watch for the end. And so Margaret had looked her last on the little angel-face, and had lost what had seemed to her the only outward thing that had formed for her, as it were, a link with him who was far away. Musing sadly, she turned from the village into the churchyard, and seated herself beneath the old yew tree. From her quiet corner, where she was herself safe from observation, she saw villager after villager trudge by,—for the churchyard was a thoroughfare,—and presently old Gilling entered from the field in which his cottage stood. As he passed on his way to his wife's grave, he seemed lost in thought, while thrusting his hand into his pocket, as though to make sure that some treasure there was safe,—

“Ah,” he said to himself, “she didn't like

him--she didn't like him ; as for that, like is *like*, and gold is *gold*. It ben't them as is liked as does you the most good ; and Mr. Miles is good to Joe, and we'll a'most make a gentle man of the lad maybe, in time. I han't forgot my promise to the old woman, neither, but the time for keeping of it ben't come yet ; and she'll be wiser where she be's now : knows as it ain't no use making a to-do, to do no good to nobody. 'Tain't for myself--'tain't for myself. I don't want to do nothing with it for myself ; but it is comfortable, like, to know that it is all safe for the lad. Any one likes to feel as he's got a bit of his own, if he didn't a-bring it into the world with him, and can't a-take of it away with him. Well, my time 'll come, I suppose, like the rest ; but I'm hale and hearty yet, and seems in hopes as I've got a good many years afore me, and a deal of flowers to look after, afore I has to be put in the coffin. I wish I could bring the old woman back again, though ! Ah, times is changed, times is changed, since we come along and went through that there door for to be married ! We was very

comfortable, for all she worried me about the money and that.”

Here again thrusting his hands into his pockets, old Gilling retraced his steps across the field to his cottage.

CHAPTER XI.

IT was time for Margaret, also, to return home, but she waited, watching, until the old man's slow footsteps had borne him out of her sight. She watched him, with curious wondering thoughts. She had only been an involuntary hearer of a word or two, here and there, where he had muttered his thoughts audibly; but the pre-occupied expression of his face, and his attitude as he bent over his wife's grave, had brought back to her his strange behaviour at the time of the old woman's death, and her own passing wonder and curiosity. But she was soon engrossed again by her sorrowful and yet peaceful musings, and as she took her way home by the fields, she was careful to keep her distance from the gardener's house, being in no mood for conversation with him. She was not to escape, however, so easily.

“Miss Marget,” called the old man, from his garden gate—“Miss Marget, be that you? I’ve a bit o’ news for yer.”

“Have you, Gilling?” replied Margaret, drawing nearer, and speaking with assumed interest. “I am afraid, though, that I must not stop to hear it, for I am rather in a hurry.”

“Be you on your way home? You’ll find company there. There’s been an arrival, Miss Marget,” said the old man, with a cunning wink and a pleased smile, intended to enhance the excitement of suspense in his hearer’s mind.

Suddenly a wild hope, an expectation,—which, seen through her imagination, appeared almost like certainty,—rushed into her heart, and agitated her almost beyond control.

“We do not expect any one. Who can have come? One of my uncles?” she managed to say.

“Better nor that,” returned the old man, slowly shaking his head. “Can’t you guess, Miss Marget? Well, then, I must tell you,

I suppose. Who should it be but Mr. Miles, to be sure?—come down to the Hall, but didn't stay a minute there,—was down at The Cottage all in such a hurry and fuss as never was,—stays for a word with me, though, but I sees as he's a-dying to get to the house, and says I to myself, 'I know who he's a-come after!' He left me in a pretty hurry, and I hear tell as he asked to see missis very partic'ler. You'll find him there now, if you be quick."

"Quick?" Poor Margaret! Would it be possible for her ever to be quick again? The sudden revulsion of feeling had seemed in a moment to take all life and spirit out of her. A sense of faintness came over her, and she would have fainted away if strong desire had not given her strength to resist.

"What's the matter, Miss Marget?" said the old man, his tone changed to one of alarm. "You was all in a flush a moment ago, and now you looks like to die!"

"I am tired, Gilling," answered Margaret, forcing a smile. "Give me a glass

of water, please, and then I must make haste home."

"There, there, sit ye down, and rest a bit, Miss Marget, for you don't look fit to walk home."

But Margaret was soon on her legs again, and strong for the walk, trying to laugh at herself for her folly, and grumbling, mentally, at the annoying news she had received; which, after all, however, she thought, did not much signify. Things were simply as they had been, neither better nor worse, only she had made a fool of herself for a moment. At the garden entrance she met Jane, who exclaimed, as she held the gate open,—

"Why, Miss Margaret, what is the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost, or was one yourself. Your mamma sent me to look for you. She thought as you was never coming, and was afraid as you might have fallen in with tramps, or something. She wished me to tell you to go to her directly you come."

"Has she been wanting me?" asked

Margaret. I'm not so very late, am I? "

"You forget, miss, how nervous your mamma is," answered Jane, reproachfully.

"I never knew her to get nervous because I did not come in till seven o'clock before!" thought Margaret. And she went into the drawing-room, quite prepared to find her mother in a very unusual state of mind.

"My dear Margaret, what have you been about all this time?" was Mrs. Wilmoughby's greeting. I was beginning to get quite anxious.

"I am very sorry mamma, but—why? Am I very late? What is it? Have you been wanting me? Has anything happened? Is anything the matter?" asked Margaret.

"Sit down, my dear child," replied her mother, in an evident fluster of nervous excitement. "I have a great deal to say to you. Some one has been here,—I shall leave you to guess who,—some one who loves you very dearly. He has been talking about you, but I shall not tell you what

he said. He must plead his own cause with you to-morrow ; he has my free permission. Oh, Margaret, what a noble heart you have won ! You surely will not trifle with it any longer ! ”

“ What do you mean, mother ? ” cried Margaret flushing up and speaking rather indignantly. “ Has Miles dared,—after all that I said to him last year,—after—— ”

“ He told me of his conversation with you last year, my dear,” interrupted her mother. “ He owns that he was too precipitate. He owns that his strong feeling led him to be unjust to you.”

“ ‘Unjust’ ! Oh, mother, if you could have known the way he spoke,—if you could have seen and heard all, you would never wish me to speak to him again ! ”

“ My dear child, this is folly. You must make allowance for lovers’ feelings. Everything is fair in love and war, you know,” returned her mother, with a little irritating laugh, which almost drove Margaret out of her mind.

“ Mamma, please don’t talk in that way,

she said, pleadingly; "I cannot bear it. It has been so sad this afternoon, because of poor little Jack,—and I am so tired! May we please talk no more about Miles to-night?"

"You are very ungrateful," returned her mother, querulously, "*very* ungrateful! You little know," she continued, with a somewhat tragic air—"you little know what he has borne for your sake during the past year!—how he has striven with himself,—how, during his flying visits to the Hall, he has refrained from uttering a word of love to you!—how, at the risk of breaking his heart, he has let his devotion flow silently on, all that he might keep his promise to you! He hoped that you would appreciate this conduct, that, at least, he might have won something of your regard; he hoped he read approval in your countenance! But it seems he is to be disappointed, that all his pain and self-denial are to go for nothing!"

"All this is humbug!" cried Margaret, half under her breath. "It is hardly a

year!" she went on, aloud, "since he gave his promise,—I don't consider that he has kept it properly. And if he had a grain of wisdom in his composition, he would know that there was no chance of my ever learning to like him."

"Then you mean to break his heart! You mean to break all our hearts! You don't care what you make your mother suffer, so that you may get your own way. Oh, Margaret! Margaret! have you no sympathy, no heart, no——"

Here Mrs. Willoughby leaned back in her easy chair, and subsided into hysterical sobbing. In a moment Margaret was by her side.

"Mother, dear mother,—mother, darling, don't, please don't! I can't bear to vex you. I would do anything to please you,—you know I would. But—but you don't understand. Let us talk about this another time!"

The *eau-de-cologne* and camphor julep and salts were brought into requisition, and by degrees Mrs. Willoughby was restored to something like composure.

“ Well, my dear,” she said, more cheerfully and more kindly, “ I dare say you will see things very differently to-morrow, when you have had a good night’s rest. I don’t wonder at your having been a little taken by surprise. Run away now, darling, and get ready for tea, and then you shall tell me about all you have been doing.”

“ And you are better, mother dear? I have not made your head really worse?” said Margaret, tenderly.

But she knew that her mother would suffer the next morning for the evening’s excitement and agitation of which she had been the unwilling cause, and weary, heavy-hearted, remorseful, and indignant, she went her way in obedience to her mother’s behests.

“ How is it to end?” she asked herself, hopelessly. “ Shall I kill mamma if I refuse to have anything to say to that odious humbug? Something, surely, must turn up to make things right!”

CHAPTER XII.

THE night had passed. The hour at which Mrs. Willoughby had hoped that her daughter would “see things differently” had arrived. Miles Grantham had paid an early visit to The Cottage, and had done Margaret the honour to ask her to be his wife. The honour had not been accepted. And the heir of Grantham Hall was standing outside the door of The Cottage, a disappointed, sore, and indignant man. All his precautions, all his prudence, all his good behaviour, had been thrown away. He had gone into Margaret’s presence armed with her mother’s favour. He had put on a modest demeanour. He had avoided all those looks and tones which he knew to be hateful to her, and had been in his manner at once straightforward, earnest, and gentle. And yet,—she had

refused him point-blank! He lingered for a moment with his hand on the door, as though half in doubt as to whether the battle were indeed yet lost, and then, with a gesture of contempt, he turned away, hurried along the Darlingster road, and presently stopped short on the threshold of a large and handsome house, where he knew that he should find consolation of a kind very dear to his vain spirit.

Margaret, meanwhile, sat gravely thoughtful in the drawing-room of The Cottage. She felt not the least touch of pity for her rejected suitor; not the faintest shadow of tender or friendly regret that it was not in her power to grant him the boon that he had asked of her; not the smallest particle of gratitude or gratification on account of the honour that had been done to her. Her answer had been polite, prompt, and decided. But now that Miles was no longer present, her thoughts reverted anxiously to her mother,—her poor mother, who was laid up with one of her worst headaches, who was a martyr to every variety

of nervous depression!—She would gladly have been able to soothe and please her, by bringing the intelligence for which she longed so eagerly, and instead of this she must carry to her news that would jar upon her nerves, add to her pain, disappoint and fret her, and perhaps do her serious injury! How should she do it? Would it not have been better to have done violence to her feelings by promising to marry the man she loathed than to have to be thus cruel to her invalid mother? At least she was determined to postpone the evil day. She would go off for a long ramble, leaving her mother undisturbed until she was better fitted to bear the news for which she would certainly ask at the very earliest opportunity. She glided lightly upstairs to prepare for her walk; not so lightly, however, but that her mother heard the gentle rustle of her dress: and before she had reached her own room a door was opened, a head thrust out, and in shrilly-excited tones a voice called, “Margaret, Margaret, come here, my dear! I want you,—I want to speak to you!”

There was nothing for it but to obey.

“What is it, mother, darling?” said Margaret, trying to speak naturally, and feeling smitten with remorse as she gazed at Mrs. Willoughby’s pallid face, heavy eyes, and nervously twitching lips. “Please lie down again. You should not have called for me yourself; why didn’t you ring the bell, and send for me through Jane?”

“I didn’t want Jane,” replied her mother, excitedly. “I wanted you. I want to know all that has passed between you and Miles this morning?”

“Miles?” returned Margaret, while she arranged her mother’s pillows, and saw her settled on the bed. “Miles? Oh, you heard the door bell, then? Yes, he has been here this morning; but I thought I would tell you all about it by-and-by, when you are better. It will take so long, and you ought to be asleep, and I have things to do out of doors. Please, mother, let us talk about it comfortably, by-and-by, this evening, after tea?”

“Do you think I could get to sleep with

my mind in this state of suspense?" said Mrs. Willoughby. "What nonsense, Margaret! Why can't you tell me at once what answer you have given to him?"

"Oh, mother, I wish I could make you know that he is not the good and delightful person he pretends to be! I wish I could teach you to hate him, as I do! Darling, I would do anything to please you but this! Oh mother, if you could but know what a detestable, odious humbug he is!"

"Margaret, be quiet!" screamed her mother; "I won't have you speak another word until you can speak more properly. How dare you use such language about a man who has done you the greatest honour that a man can do to a woman! A man, too, who could have any woman he chose, all over the world, only for the asking!" She paused, breathless.

"Then, mother," said Margaret, with a laugh, "he may the more easily console himself for my refusal of the offered honour!"

"You mean, then, to tell me that, know-

ing my wishes, knowing all our wishes, knowing all he has borne and done for your sake, the consideration he has shown to your feelings, the encouragement that you have given to him,—you actually dare to tell me that you have refused him altogether, without giving him a hope, without telling him that you will try to learn to love him? Margaret, I cannot believe that you have been so cruel, so selfish, so——”

“Mother, mother, you will hurt yourself, you will make yourself ill! Please, please, don’t! If only you knew, you would not say all this. Let us talk about it by-and-by. Believe me I have given him no encouragement; if he told you I had, he——” she left the sentence unfinished, and turned away to the window to try to calm herself. She wanted only to think of her mother, to remember that she was ill and nervous, and not responsible for the cruel and unjust things that she had been saying; but it was hard not to feel aggrieved and hurt!

When she turned round again, Mrs.

Willoughby was sitting up, pressing one hand tightly down on the top of her head, and with the other clutching violently at the bed-clothes; and there was a look on her face which startled Margaret, and put everything but her mother's sufferings, for the moment, out of her head.

"Mother dear, lie down and let me bathe your forehead with *eau-de-cologne*," she said, soothingly.

But her mother signed her away.

"Go, Margaret, go," she exclaimed by-and-by, as Margaret continued to stand looking on in helpless trouble. "Go,—I am too ill to talk more now. Go,—you little know how much you have caused me to suffer!"

"Jane, you must go to mamma, please; she is very ill," said Margaret, abruptly, to the maid, on meeting her as she was leaving her mother's room.

And then she went out on the lawn, and walked about restlessly beneath the trees in front, looking up, from time to time, at Mrs. Willoughby's window, and, in her misery,

almost feeling inclined to vow any acquiescence in her mother's wishes, if only she might be cured of her sufferings, and would once more be pleased with her, and let her nurse and caress her as usual.

CHAPTER XIII.

AND Miles? How was he bearing his share of misery all this time? How was he continuing to endure the disappointment of his life's best hopes? It would seem that he had found some one to help him to bear his burden,—to soothe him under the severe affliction which had befallen him! At the very moment when Margaret was out under the trees, alone with her great distress and anxiety, he who had caused them was to be seen sauntering slowly round a pleasant garden, at the back of Elgin Villa, near Darlingster, with a young lady whose name was Alice Craycroft. He looked at her tenderly. He spoke in low tones. And although he made her the *confidante* of his disappointed love, those looks and those tones seemed to belie his tale of woe. And

Alice, for the time being, was blissfully contented. It seemed to her that he was saying,—

“Circumstances have made it desirable that I should marry Margaret Willoughby, but my deepest affections are bestowed upon you, and it is to you that I look for comfort in my sorrow.”

Not that he did say all this in so many words; but the momentary glances of his dark eyes suggested a thousand unutterable things, which Alice Craycroft's heart translated according to her own fond wishes. And in truth Miles Grantham found the society of this young lady fully as agreeable as that of Margaret Willoughby. Certainly she was not so clever, she was not so well-bred, she was not so naïve and graceful, she was not,—Miles in short, might have found a hundred negatives to the disadvantage of Alice Craycroft. But nevertheless, had the connection been equally good, had the fortune been equally sure, had the world smiled with equal approval on the one as on the other, it is probable that Alice's

wistful looks, confiding ways, and flattering idolatry, would have gained a victory, and that poor Margaret might have been spared much worry, boredom, and more serious trouble. But as matters stood, pretty Alice Craycroft, with her vulgar relations and her boarding-school manners, was not deserving of a moment's serious thought on the part of so important a person as the heir of Grantham Hall. She might be put aside with a sigh, but put aside she must be. None the less for this, however, was it soothing to his vanity to be with her.

“Then you will write to me? You will not forget your promise?” he was saying now, as the *tête-à-tête* began to draw to a close? You will tell me all you can about her?”

“I will not forget. I will see as much of her as I can,—and I think,—I am almost certain,—that I shall have good news to send you,” returned Alice, with a quiver in her voice, and with the sensation of being exceedingly generous and noble-minded, very like the heroine of one of her favourite novels. “But, but have you quite made up

your mind that it is best for you to go? Perhaps if you were to stay, she might,—oh, I am sure she could not help learning to love you!”

He shook his head. “Ah, you do not know her!” he answered. “Just now she hates the very sight of me. No, I shall be best away for the present. You judge others by your own kind heart, Miss Craycroft!” She blushed and turned away. The compliment was rather equivocal, but the tone in which it was spoken, the look with which it was accompanied, made it thrill deliciously through Alice Craycroft’s sentimental soul. “But I shall come back again, and perhaps try my luck once more, one of these days,” he went on, “and if she continues to be cruel, at least I shall know where to come for comfort. Miss Craycroft, how can I thank you enough for all your kindness!”

He was holding her hand in his, as he spoke, and for an instant his timid eyes gazed tenderly into hers.

“Good-bye, Miss Craycroft, good-bye, I

shall hear from you soon?" he continued, adding abruptly, as though with sudden recollection, "and you will remember to tell me if that old fellow Gilling annoys you again?"

"Oh, he did not annoy me. I was not at all frightened for myself. Only what he said struck me as very strange, and I felt as if I were living in a novel, and—and I thought perhaps I had better tell you."

"You were quite right, and I thank you very much, Miss Craycroft. I know you will kindly let it be a secret between you and me? Darlingster is such a gossiping place, and I would not have it come to my uncle's and aunt's ears for anything. It might disturb them. It does not trouble me in the least, but old people's minds are more easily upset. Gilling has been very strange for a long time. A year ago I thought that there was a screw loose about him, somewhere, and it is very evident to me now that he is fast going out of his mind."

"Really!" exclaimed Alice, with an air of alarm.

“Oh, you need not be frightened, Miss Craycroft. There is no fear of his becoming violent. But he must be watched. I mean to keep an eye upon him, quietly. And you will help me?”

“Oh, yes, yes,” answered Alice eagerly.

“It was yesterday, you say, that you saw him, and that he said what you told me?”

“Yes; I went to the cottage when it got cool enough for walking, and when I knew he would be back from his work. He began by telling me that you had come, and how good you had been to him, and then,—yes, certainly I noticed that he got very odd and excited.”

“Ah!” returned Miles, thoughtfully, “I see. I must be more careful! Good-bye, Miss Craycroft. I shall hope to hear soon, then, good-bye,” and so they squeezed hands, and parted.

Alice watched him out of sight, the delightful sense of being a mover in an actual romance growing upon her as she did so. She had often envied Margaret, but she envied her no longer; she only pitied her bad taste. “He will awake from his

dreams all in good time!" she said to herself. "He will find out the meaning of his tender feeling for me. And we shall laugh together over his old fancied love for her. Of course, though, I shall try to make her love him. I must be generous, and sacrifice my own feelings for their sakes, if needful! But I don't think,—I scarcely think,—she can care for him. If she does, if I sacrifice myself and bring them together, I shall certainly go into a decline! They will watch me gradually fading away, and as soon as I am gone he will find out that it was me whom he loved all the time! Alas, poor Miles!"

The sad vision that she had conjured up seemed so interesting, that for a few moments she thought it would be almost as good a reality as that of a happy marriage. But those few moments past, her fears of disappointment became very active.

"I think I'll look in upon her this evening," she thought, "after he has left, and find out what her feeling really is. And I'll go and see that old man; perhaps he will say something more curious. It may be ne-

cessary for me to write to Mr. Grantham to-morrow ; ” which delightful contingency made Alice happy for the present. Miles had for once spoken the truth when he had talked of the gossiping tendencies of the people of Darlingster. But he was not aware that in all the neighbourhood no one loved gossip better than Alice herself. Her soul delighted in it, and with gossip as the object in view, she was an indefatigable visitor, both of rich and poor. She had had a double motive, however, in visiting old Gilling on the previous afternoon. She had heard of Miles Grantham’s arrival at the Hall, and had gone to see his *protégé*, as she considered old Gilling, in the hope of an encounter with himself; or, failing this, on the chance of learning something about him. It is possible, also, that his meeting with the heir of Grantham, accompanied with an order to go and drink his health, may have had something to do with the gardener’s excitement and want of reticence during her visit, and that Miles may have been wise in his present resolution to be more careful for the future. At all

events, Alice had found little difficulty in drawing Gilling into an engrossing gossip about the Hall and its inhabitants, and he had been considerably more gracious and more confidential with her than was in accordance with his usual noted reserve.

Her resolve to renew her visit to Grantham that evening was carried out ; but with disappointing results. The old gardener was surly, and would not enlarge on any topic that was brought forward. And if she did get anything out of him in reference to Grantham Hall, it was of a most matter-of-fact and every-day nature, and seemed to contradict his mysterious words of the evening before. She almost began to think that the revelation that had been made to her was only part of a strange and unaccountable dream, and that actual life was not so romantic a thing as her impressions of the last twenty-four hours had led her to hope. On leaving Gilling, she went to The Cottage, but was dismayed to learn that Mrs. Willoughby was exceedingly ill, and that Miss Willoughby could see nobody.

CHAPTER XIV.

WE left Margaret anxiously looking up at her mother's window, from beneath the trees on The Cottage lawn. It seemed an endless watch. Half an hour or so went by, and still Jane was to be seen gliding about the bedroom or standing by the bedside. Presently a bell rang, and soon afterwards Margaret heard the hall-door being opened and shut, and discovered that Jane was leaving the sick room. She hastened indoors, and upstairs, just as some one was being ushered in to her mother. Then having waylaid Jane, she was informed that Lady Grantham was with Mrs. Willoughby.

“Lady Grantham! But mamma was not fit to see any one!” exclaimed Margaret.

“It was her wish, miss. I wasn't to say anything to nobody. I was to send for Lady

Grantham immediate. I don't know as it will do any good, but the mischief is already done."

"Mischief, Jane? What mischief? Is there much the matter?" asked Margaret, in alarm.

"I never see her so bad before; I should say some one had been bothering of her," answered Jane, severely.

"Had we not better send for Mr. Thomas?" said Margaret.

"It ain't doctors what'll do her any good, miss; it's some one what'll consider her feelings, and not worrit her by their contrariness."

"I don't think you understand much about it, Jane," replied Margaret, trying to assume some dignity with her mother's confidential maid. What has mamma been saying?"

"Enough to make me understand more than you think, perhaps, Miss Margaret. Any one as has got troubles and sufferings must come out to *some* one as has feelings. It's well for them if they've got *any* one as can sympathise with them! Poor dear

missis ! She does suffer terrible, to be sure ! ”

“ What is that ? ” cried Margaret, suddenly. “ How odd mamma’s voice sounds ! Jane, do go in, and see if she is any worse. ”

“ Don’t you fidget, Miss Margaret. I know when to go in, and I ain’t going to put myself forward, until the time comes. ”

“ Then I shall go in, ” said Margaret.

“ But this the autocrat of the bedchamber peremptorily forbade ; and having thus asserted her self-importance, Jane hastened without further delay, to Mrs. Willoughby’s room ; while Margaret stationed herself at the door, and listened, in an agony, to groans and rambling talk, and soothing replies.

Presently Jane came out, and said, hurriedly, “ She’s off her head, poor dear ; talks all of a *incoherient* fashion, what it’s awful to hear. Them as has done it has a deal to answer for ! We must send for the doctor immediate ; but *I* can’t leave her, poor dear. ”

Margaret took the hint, and a messenger was sent without delay into Darlingster for

the doctor, who soon appeared, and pronounced it to be a case of nervous fever. He came out with Lady Grantham, looking very grave; and Margaret felt two pairs of eyes gazing reproachfully at her, while he talked of "disturbing causes," "an excitable nature," "sensitive nerves," "hysteria" and so forth.

She could not have felt much more remorseful or miserable than she felt at that moment had she known herself to have been her mother's wilful murderer. What did it matter to her that she had not intentionally injured her mother, and that it had grieved her to the heart to have to vex her? She *had* vexed her, she, her child, had been the cause of her illness! So she angrily told herself. A thousand exaggerated fears came over her, and when Lady Grantham returned to her mother's room, she ran downstairs just in time to catch the doctor before he went out at the hall door.

"Is mamma very ill, Mr. Thomas?" she asked, breathlessly. "Is there any danger?"

Perhaps an inkling of something allied to

the true state of the case came to the good man, as he looked at the eager face that was anxiously raised to his. That noble brow, those sweet eyes, and that tender mouth did not look as if they ought to belong to a vixenish and unmanageable daughter! He saw, at least, that she had been needlessly alarmed, and he re-assured her with kindly looks and words.

“She must be kept very quiet. She must not be annoyed or troubled in any way. And then, with the help of your good nursing, Miss Willoughby, I hope we shall soon see her herself again,” were his last words.

Relieved and thankful, Margaret took her way upstairs, and, in spite of Jane’s forbidding looks, dared to enter her mother’s room. “I am going to stay here,” she whispered, seating herself in a low chair, at the head of the bed, where she was hidden by the curtain. “Mr. Thomas says I may, so you can go down and have your dinner, Jane.”

“I ain’t a-going to leave missis, Miss Margaret. So it’s no use your saying nothing about it.”

“ Yes you are, Jane, and I’ll be sure to ring if we want anything.”

So having delivered her soul of a protest, Jane found it convenient to go. Then Lady Grantham, looking at her watch, said she was afraid she must not remain any longer, adding, in a freezing tone, “ You will be sure to let me know, Margaret, if your poor mamma should be worse, if there should be any change, or if she should ask for me? And I hope you will be careful not to disturb her by any painful allusions. Mr. Thomas says he will not answer for the consequences if she is worried or thwarted in the slightest degree. She seems to have fallen into a doze now,—sleep is her best chance, but I don’t like her look at all.”

With which cheering observation Lady Grantham went away, and Margaret was left to her own reflections. Amidst all her anxiety and distress, she found herself longing, more passionately than she had ever longed before, for Charles Meredith. If she might only see him for a moment, tell him all about it, ask his advice and

receive his sympathy, she thought she could bear anything almost that might be about to happen ! If he would only come again, her mother would see that he was sincere, would soften towards him, would learn to love him, and to hate Miles, would recover, and, in short, all would be right ! In the quiet of the sick room, Margaret almost dreamed herself, for a while, back into happiness.

CHAPTER XV.

THE world of Darlingster and its neighbourhood was very busy for a time with the affairs of the inhabitants of Grantham Cottage, in connection with Grantham Hall. "That flirt Margaret" came in for a large share of blame. People talked of her ill-treatment of Miles: of how she had given him as much encouragement as it was possible for a girl to give, of how she had cast her spells over him, drawing him away from others, at whose feet he would otherwise have thrown himself,—all for the sake of feeding her own vanity. Some one even hinted at mysterious reasons for this withdrawal of her favour from Miles. And there were not wanting those who expressed doubts as to whether it was, after all, so certain as had been supposed that

it was Sir John Grantham's intention to leave the property to his nephew. In short, a thousand extravagant notions were being bruited about. But the more moderate and sober-minded gossips put down these rumours as the chimerical and romantic fancies of an extreme party; and were content, for their part, with the belief that Margaret's bad behaviour had almost broken a good man's heart, and had well-nigh driven a tender and solicitous mother out of her mind or into her coffin. Many heads were shaken over Mrs. Willoughby's illness. Some doubted whether she would ever rise from her bed again. Others declared it to be impossible that her mind could ever recover its proper balance. And it was generally given out that she was laid up with a severe attack of brain fever.

Margaret, meanwhile, had the satisfaction of seeing her mother gradually improve in health. She was soon able to sit up, and before long Mr. Thomas pronounced her to be convalescent. But, unfortunately, Mrs. Willoughby's opinion did not tally with that

of her doctor. And long after he had given her permission to go out, and had assured Margaret that there was no longer any cause for anxiety, she considered herself to be unfit to move from her room, and wondered that the doctor should be so foolish as to pretend to think her better, when he must know that she had come to a standstill, and was not likely to recover even the little strength that she had had before her terrible illness.

Again and again the nervous invalid almost succeeded in frightening her daughter out of her wits, and Margaret was hardly reassured by the doctor's own assertion,—which she wonderingly overheard one day, when his tones were raised somewhat higher than their wont, during a confidential conversation with Jane, not far from her mistress's door.

“She might be as strong as anybody,” he said, “if she chose! She only wants to recover her nervous energy, which she will never do until she allows herself some fresh air, and begins to exert herself a little.”

When Margaret went to her mother, with some notion of cheering her up, with a modification of the doctor's opinion, she found her walking quickly about the room, in great excitement, and with as much ease as if she did not know what weakness meant. She was crying and sobbing hysterically, and after a moment's pause of dismayed astonishment, Margaret hastened to give her a glass of camphor julep. But she signed her away.

"No," she panted; "no,"—then came a great gulp,—“I don't want it, I don't want anything. Let me die, and then you will have no more trouble with me, and can disobey my wishes as much as you like!”

“Mother dear, what in the world do you mean? Mr. Thomas says you are better, and that it would do you good to go out. He would laugh at the notion of your dying.”

To Margaret's surprise, this cheering news only occasioned a fresh burst of tears.

“I see what it is,—I see what it is! You have been making out to Mr. Thomas that

I give way, that I could do a great deal more if I liked ; ” so she jerked out, between spasmodic attacks of weeping and panting. “ He shall see,—he shall see ! I will exert myself as much as you all wish, and it won’t matter if it kills me. You will be rid of the trouble of me.”

“ Mother, darling, don’t ! How can you say such horrible things ? You know quite well that I should not care for my life at all if I had not you to think about. Do lie down and rest ; you will wear yourself out ! ”

“ I am not going to lie down. I am going out. Tell Jane to come and get my walking things out for me. It is all very well, Margaret, for you to call me darling, and to pretend in words to be very affectionate and dutiful. But you know well enough that that will do me no good while you continue obstinately determined to rebel against my wishes. It all depends upon you whether or not I regain my health and strength. You know well enough what caused my illness in the first instance ; and

how do you think I am ever to get well if my mind continues to be troubled and harassed in the same manner? ”

“ Mamma, you know that I long to please you. I will try, indeed I will, to do all that you wish,” Here she paused abruptly, for at the moment Jane entered.

“ Well, my dear child, we will talk about this again by-and-by,” said Mrs. Willoughby, brightening up. And, her agitation somewhat calmed, she sank down in an easy chair, nearly exhausted by her late unwonted efforts.

“ Mamma wants you to get her ready to go out,” said Margaret; “ but I think she ought to rest and have a glass of wine before she goes.”

“ She ain’t no more fit to go out and walk nor a baby,” said Jane; “ I don’t care if a hundred doctors says she is.” But Mrs. Willoughby was bent on martyrdom. She would not even have a carriage. She chose to go and walk herself tired, and came in with a splitting headache. Then in the evening she chose to agitate herself.

“ Margaret,” she said, with startling

suddenness, “will you promise to try to love Miles Grantham?”

“Mamma dear!” cried Margaret, in dismayed as astonishment. “What can I say? How can I try? What can I do? Let me think over what you ask, and we can talk about it another time. You must try to get to sleep now; Mr. Thomas likes you to go to bed early.”

“I understand, I know!” cried her mother, shrilly. “Very well, Margaret, deceive me as you did before! Make me ill again! Consult your own wishes before those of your mother!”

“Mother, darling, don’t say such cruel things,” said Margaret, beseechingly. “You know well enough how I love you. It is only because you are tired that you think so hardly of me.”

“Very well, very well, say no more about it; I won’t hear another word on the subject, to-night! Only, Mr. Thomas must know what it is that retards my recovery, and makes a slight exertion upset my nerves so terribly. Oh, if you had ever felt such

suffering as this!" And she pressed her hand on the top of her head, and closed her eyes, and put on an expression of martyr-like submission. In short, Mrs Willoughby had made up her mind to resign herself to interesting invalidism for the rest of her life, unless,—unless she could have her own way,—unless her present whim with regard to her daughter could be satisfied! She had the satisfaction of finding herself much worse the next morning. "Ah," she thought, "Mr. Thomas will have to own now that I am not fit for the least exertion. He will see to-day how really ill I am!" And certainly he did find her nervously feverish, and looking very unwell. She was evidently suffering much.

"Your orders was attended to, sir," said Jane, in a tone of asperity. "And missis went out to walk yesterday.

"You shouldn't have let her over do it," retorted the doctor.

"Missis has such *h*energy, you see, sir, it ain't easy to keep her within bounds!"

"I find a very little knocks me up, at present," said Mrs. Willoughby, languidly.

“You must go on, by degrees, doing a little bit more each day,” said the doctor. “You are certainly not fit for anything to-day but to lie still; but I hope in a day or two we may get you out on the lawn for a few minutes’ fresh air.”

“It ain’t fresh air what missis wants,” said Jane, when, his say ended, she followed the doctor to the door; and a sob from the bed at the same moment made both turn round to look again at the invalid. “She’ve a deal to trouble her,” went on Jane, in a low tone, “and them as does it has a deal to answer for!” And then she added something in a whisper.

After his parley with the lady’s-maid, Mr. Thomas went to the drawing-room in search of Margaret.

“My dear Miss Willoughby,” he said, “you really must take care not to agitate your mamma in any way. Her nerves, as you know, are not in a state to bear it. I find her suffering very much to-day from having been upset yesterday.”

Margaret looked distressed.

“I know,” she answered, “and I thought I had tried not to let her be worried. But I am afraid I manage very badly.”

“You mean that she is easily disturbed and distressed? Or has she something especial on her mind, which she cannot forget?”

His manner was so kind, so little impertinent, as he asked these questions, that Margaret felt half inclined to come out to him with her troubles, and to ask his advice and help.

“I don’t know what Lady Grantham and our maid may have said to you,” she replied; “but perhaps you ought to know that there is something that is troubling poor mamma. I have disappointed her about something. I cannot quite explain it to you, but,—I don’t know how to help vexing her without being untrue. And of course now that she is so ill, she feels it doubly.”

“It is very hard for you, my dear,” said Mr. Thomas; “but it is really of the utmost importance that your mamma should not be agitated at present. You must avoid the

painful subject as far as possible ; and you must contrive to give in to her wishes just now as much as you can."

" More easily said than done ! " Margaret thought ; but the doctor was so serious, and frightened her so much by the way in which he talked of her mother's nervous state, and the mental consequences to be feared if her wishes were injudiciously opposed, that she resolved to exercise all the tact and ingenuity that she could command, to put her own feelings on one side, let her mother feel that she was studying hers, gain peace and quiet for the present, and leave the future to take care of itself.

Meanwhile, in spite of the orders that he had given, Mr. Thomas' sympathies were with Margaret, and not with his patient ; and as he left the house, he determined to be on the look out, and to take good care that the poor child was not bullied by that weak and selfish mother, and her foolish friends. But with all his good intentions, what could the kind-hearted man do to help Margaret out of her troubles? Nothing

as yet, at any rate. His advice was followed. His patient got better. And all for a time appeared to go smoothly. But Margaret was still, secretly, often troubled, anxious, and heavy-hearted.

CHAPTER XV.

A DECIDED change for the better had been effected in Mrs. Willoughby's health, and it was Margaret who had applied the remedy! She had promised her mother to bear again with the society and the attentions of Miles Grantham, to permit him to use every effort to win her, and even to try to conquer her own seemingly unconquerable aversion. She had not stayed to count the cost. The desire to save her mother from farther pain,—the hope of seeing her cheerful and well,—had been strong enough to overcome all other thought and feeling. So the weak and wilful woman was able to victimise her loving child. A conversation between Lady Grantham and Mrs. Willoughby had resulted in the despatch of a letter to Miles, recalling him to Grant-

ham. He had arrived. A series of little parties had been instituted at the Hall. Mrs. Willoughby had suddenly recovered sufficient strength to enable her to enjoy the pleasures of society up to a tolerably late hour at night. And all went gaily as a marriage feast. Even Margaret,—in spite of the irksomeness of her position, as the adored of Miles, in spite of her secret misgiving as to how the drama in which she was taking a part was to end,—found the relief from her late nightmare fears and her past distress, on her mother's account, so great, that it was very possible for her, also, to be very heartily merry. Her mother looked on approvingly, and for the present, at least, her 'sacrifice was not without its reward. She really succeeded in being passably civil to Miles. And though the unnecessary amount of languor and irritability, and the persistent invalid habits, which daylight always seemed to bring back to the nervous patient, were somewhat trying to her daughter, she bore all with as much equanimity as possible, and really did her

best to be amiable and cheerful. Only, when the need for immediate effort was over, and she was alone,—without excitement, and without the eyes of a gossiping world upon her,—she gave herself up to perplexing and troublous thoughts, and to sore longings, which seemed as if they must have some result.

Again and again she echoed the question, “How is it all to end?” “I am a great humbug,” she thought to herself,—“I am a great humbug, I am afraid. For though I certainly don’t give Miles any encouragement, I fear I am buoying mamma up with hopes which can never be fulfilled, without my becoming a worse humbug, and perhaps breaking other hearts besides my own. How will she bear the disappointment at last! and would any other heart be broken? Does he care still?”

A great leap at her heart would seem to answer “Yes,” and then her grave reflections would often be concluded by a laugh, and a declaration to herself that there was nothing for it but putting on the spirit of a Micawber,

and waiting, philosophically, for "something to turn up." "Something surely, surely must turn up! It is impossible that we can go on in this miserable manner for ever." Thus her thoughts would often run, youthful hope getting the better of gloomy forebodings.

But the winter came, without anything "turning up" to alter the current of Margaret's life. There was the usual house-full at the Hall, for Christmas. There were the usual balls and dinner parties at Darlingster. Miles Grantham continued to appear peculiarly attentive to each young lady of the neighbourhood, to be extraordinarily tender to Alice Craycroft, and to be serious in his devotion to Margaret Willoughby. He was in no hurry to marry, and the present state of affairs suited his inclinations remarkably well; especially as he agreed with Lady Grantham that there could be no doubt whatever of his final success. Margaret continued to submit to Miles' persecution, for her mother's sake, with as good a grace as she could. And Mrs. Willoughby continued to approve, complain, hope, and despair by

turns, and, through all, to determine, strongly, to have her own way, and to permit her daughter to be happy in no other.

Spring came and went; but the something that was expected "to turn up" might be looked for in vain.

Summer arrived, and Mrs. Willoughby showed visible signs of impatience, and even threatened to invite the attack of another nervous fever, if Margaret waited much longer without throwing herself into the arms of Miles Grantham.

Mr. Thomas was called in to ward off, if he could, the expected illness. But to Mrs. Willoughby's aggrieved surprise, he gave more heed to Margaret's pale cheeks and looks of weariness than he did to her own nervous symptoms. Change of air was prescribed for Margaret, and small attention paid to her own protest that it was unnecessary, or to her mother's declaration that she could not stand the fatigue of travelling, and could not possibly spare Margaret, now that she was on the verge of a feverish illness.

"It was a cruel world," Mrs. Willoughby

thought, "a cruel and unsympathizing world!" All her objections were beaten down, and there was "no one but poor Jane to understand" her! An opportunely pressing invitation to London, however, came to settle the question. Mrs. Willoughby was excited into forgetfulness of her threatened illness, and thought she should like to go. She had always been too indolent to give Margaret the chance of amusement in town, during the season; but going on a visit to a luxurious house was a different matter. She would be spared all trouble, and could go out, or not go out, as the fancy took her, or as her health permitted. Besides, there was the chance that Margaret might marry Lord Any-Body, which, after all, would be as good or even better than, as, marrying the heir of Grantham; or, at any rate, she might learn to forget that stupid young nobody who had chosen to fall in love with her, and things might be brought to a point with Miles Grantham, who had loved her so long and so devotedly.

For herself, Margaret was ready to wel-

come any change that would distract her mother's mind from its usual favourite subjects of contemplation, Miles Grantham and nervous fever. And besides, who could tell what happy occurrences might not take place during the London visit! She did not know what she expected,—in fact she expected nothing in particular; but anything was possible, anything might turn up, to throw glowing colours over her own life and her mother's.

So the invitation was accepted, and its acceptance resulted in new whims and new hopes for Mrs. Willoughby, and in new worries for her daughter Margaret! Not that the visit was by any means made up of worry for Margaret: far otherwise! She enjoyed it for a time intensely. The sights and sounds and society of London amused and interested her fresh and eager mind. Her enjoyment, moreover, was in a manner double, for as she recalled past conversations with Charles Meredith, on pictures, music, and people, and fancied what he would say with reference to this or that

person or thing, she seemed to be drawn nearer to him in spirit, and to be able to enter, through her imagination, into all his thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Excitement, too, had the power of quickening her hopes. It was impossible, she thought, utterly impossible, but that she must be meant to meet him again before long !

There were moments, however, when she gazed with heart-sick, hopeless longings through the crowd, in search of the one face which it would have been sweet to her to see. And there were weary moments of re-action after excitement, when her heart ached sorely after the friend whom she loved so well, and when her inner life seemed all the more dreary to her for the outward pleasures and gaiety in which she had been taking a part.

“Mother dear, when are we going home?” asked Margaret, rather wearily, one night when bed-time had arrived, after a dinner-party at the house of the friends with whom they were staying.

“Home, Margaret ! Are you not happy

here? Do you want to go home? I thought you seemed happy enough this evening, when you were talking to Lord Mark Denham!" answered her mother, rather sharply.

"Yes, mamma, I like him very much," said Margaret, thinking to herself how especially she had felt to like him when it had accidentally come out that Charles Meredith had been an Oxford friend of his, and he had mentioned having met him some months since, in the Louvre at Paris;—and remembering the heart-sinking disappointment she had felt on finding that he had nothing to tell her about his old friend's present life and whereabouts. "Do you know, mamma, she added, with sudden impulse, "he knows Mr. Meredith! They were acquaintances at Oxford, and he liked him immensely."

"Indeed," returned Mrs. Willoughby, coldly, and with an irritating smile; "and is it this interesting reminder of Mr. Meredith that has given you the wish to withdraw from the world, and retire into the seclusion of Grantham all of a sudden?"

“Mamma, what nonsense!” answered Margaret, quickly. “I beg your pardon, but did you fancy that I had forgotten Mr. Meredith, so soon? We were too close friends, and saw far too much of each other, for that to be possible. But you need not be afraid of my speaking of him as anything more than a great friend. Perhaps he has left off thinking about me; at any rate, I do not expect him to come in search of me, so you may make yourself quite easy, mother, on the subject of Charles Meredith.”

“Then, my love, I cannot understand why you should have got tired of this pleasant life so quickly. If Miles Grantham were at home, now——”

“You can scarcely think, mamma,” broke in Margaret, with some impatience, “that that thought would make me long to find myself at home again.”

“My dear child,” said Mrs. Willoughby, the notion suddenly jumping into her head, “can it be possible that, that— Have you been disappointed in any way about Lord Mark Denham? Has he—is he ——”

“Disappointed about Lord Mark Denham? What in the world can you mean, mother?” laughed Margaret. “What could happen to disappoint me about Lord Mark Denham? Lord Mark and I are very good friends, but we are in no way deeply interested in each other’s life and welfare.”

“Margaret, Margaret,” said Mrs. Willoughby, reproachfully, “will you ever learn not to trifle with other people’s affections in this heartless, cruel manner! I tell you, if ever man was attached to woman, Lord Mark Denham is attached to you!”

“Mamma!” began Margaret.

But her mother went on,—

“And you pretend to tell me that you mean nothing by all the apparent encouragement that you have given him?”

“If to answer a civil question with a civil answer is to give encouragement, I am guilty of having given Lord Mark Denham whatever encouragement he may desire, supposing that to be any. I don’t know in what other way I can have appeared to give him encouragement.”

“My dear, it is of no use for you to deny that Lord Mark Denham is continually at your side, talking to you, whispering to you, and paying you every sort of marked attention. Your cousin Mary observed it as well as I. Margaret, will you ever learn to know your own mind? We thought the other day that you seemed to be completely engrossed by Sir Thomas Fletcher, but his going out of town seemed not to affect you in the slightest degree, and now,—oh, I did hope that it was going to be all right with poor Lord Mark Denham.”

“And so it will be all right for him, depend upon it, mamma!” returned Margaret, laughing, while she rang the bell for Jane, and turned to leave her mother’s room.

“I can’t make you out, Margaret!” said Mrs. Willoughby, plaintively. “It seems to me that you are never satisfied. I hoped that you had been enjoying yourself since we came up to town. You have appeared happy enough, and now it turns out that all the time you have been longing to be at home again.”

“Indeed you are mistaken, mother. I have enjoyed myself immensely, and shall be contented to stay here as much longer as you like. Only I got just now a sort of craving for a sight of the wood and a breath of home air.”

“Ah, we will have Lord Mark Denham down to see our woods!” said Mrs. Willoughby, brightening up; and she added, to herself, “I am determined, at all events, to put an end to the girl’s dreaming about that young Mr. Meredith.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE London season came to a close. The Willoughbys returned home, to be congratulated on the good which change of air and gaiety had effected. And Margaret found it very easy to be bright, to talk glibly of her gay time in London, and with interest of all that she had seen and done. She felt indeed to have gained something. Fresh windows had been opened in her mind, and she was able to live, as it were, new lives, apart from her own peculiar life and its concerns.

The people at the Hall congratulated Mrs. Willoughby on the improvement in her daughter. They were convinced that London had cured her of her dreamy fancies about young Meredith. Lady Grantham was glad that "the child had had her chance," and as, apparently, she had come

back heart-whole, she had a better hope than ever that her dear Miles would finally succeed in winning her. He was coming down soon, and, somehow, Margaret bore the prospect of his visit better than she had ever borne it before. She felt, instinctively, that her mother's "views" for her had widened and multiplied; and this feeling lessened the sense of *gêne* with which she had always contemplated the approaching presence of Miles Grantham.

But below all this increase of freedom and relief, below all this fresh sunshine which had crept unawares over the surface of her life, lay a sense of blank and disappointment, which often caused her heart to ache heavily. The hopes which she had carried with her to town had been very vague and indefinite; but now that the excitement which had given them life had passed away, it seemed to her that the one thing for which she had really cared had died with them, and had left her innermost soul coldly dreary and desolate. Mrs. Willoughby might have accused her, with justice, of

dreaming about Charles Meredith. And as she wandered through the woods, indulging melancholy and morbid musings, she asked herself, "What more is to come? Is this wretched state of things to go on for ever and ever? Am I never to see him,—never to explain?"

The sudden mention of him, the slight information about him, had been just enough to tantalize her, and to make her fancies about him more tangible, and the longings to clear away the misunderstanding with which he had left her more intense. The momentary bliss of hearing him spoken of had left her more heart-hungry than she had been before, and there was apparently no chance of her hunger being ever satisfied.

By-and-by, however, the effect of reaction after excitement passed away, and she gave herself up with more healthy energy to the quiet interests of her useful home life. By-and-by, too, she began to say to herself again, "Something, surely, will throw a light yet! Who knows what another year may bring about?" "Hope on, hope ever,"

was once more the motto which made the pleasant burden of her youthful song!

How would it end? What would “throw a light?” Was the quiet history of the daily life which seemed to her so colourless and so unromantic, being woven by unseen hands into a chain of events which were closely connected with the secret story of her inmost heart? Were the common-place beings who lived and moved around her, acting a part which would prove them hereafter to have been, in truth, characters moving upon the scenes of her own Life’s Drama? Would anything that had power to touch her very nearly ever come to change delightfully the tenour of her life? or would she only learn, gradually, to be reconciled to things as they were?—to see the history of her days by degrees harmonizing into meaning and beauty?—to see even disappointments and troubles, and things unexplained, changed by some mysterious and gracious agency into a marvellous net-work of lovely colouring, formed of submission, gentleness, strength patient hope, and loving sympathy?

CHAPTER XVII.

EIGHT years had passed away since the night on which Miles Grantham had interrupted a *tête-à-tête* between Charles Meredith and Margaret Willoughby. Eight years had passed, and Charles Meredith had not yet crossed Margaret's path again! She had given up expecting it! She had given up "expecting something to happen." She had given up looking back with a lingering, longing, passionate gaze, that would fain have dispelled the bitterness of a "faultful past," and have drawn its sweetness up into the living present. She had given up looking into the far future with impatient, restless eyes, that would fain have shaped the shadowy distance according to the fashion of their "own sweet will."

Years of uncertainty had taught her a

lesson of certainty! She had become reconciled to the imperfections of her life, and had learnt to find it sweet and dear, despite its many faults. She no longer hungered after her former friend and companion, but she had not lost her faith in him. She had not given up the hope that, some time,—in some mysterious way (who could tell how, or when, or where?),—she should find herself with him again, loving him, and being loved, with a love that was the better and the truer for all these years of separation and waiting. Could she at this instant have seen Charles Meredith, would her dreams have been dispelled? Would she have found the reality answering to the noble ideal which had so long dwelt in the world of her imagination? However this may have been, it is certain that if the real Charles Meredith was possessed of powers of appreciation equalling those of the hero of Margaret's dreams, he would have found the Margaret Willoughby of the present day no less deserving of his admiration, or of his love, than she had been in the days of

her early youth. She had lost nothing, and she had gained much. What had been bright about her had become softer in its brilliant light, what had been soft and gentle, had gained in strength, what had been sweet was more bewitchingly and surprisingly sweet than it had been before ! And over her movements, or the lines of her face and figure when in repose, there rested an indefinable grace, which implied an absence of egoism and self-consciousness, and gave, even to a passing beholder, the sense of a true and tender sympathy. Any one who was hunting the world for a faultless woman would certainly have been disappointed in Margaret Willoughby ; but he who, stumbling upon her unawares, failed to be satisfied with her imperfection, must indeed have been of a nature difficult to please, and hypercritical in the last extreme. At the present moment, however, she might have been painted as a picture rather of Perfection than of Imperfection. It was a still August afternoon. The shadows were lengthening across the lawn,

while the golden sunshine lay in brilliant contrast by their side, or crept stealthily through the thick foliage of trees and shrubs, or slanted quietly across ivy-covered stems and trunks. And Margaret's attitude, as she rested beneath the branches of a wide-spreading cedar tree, harmonised with the scene around, and expressed the perfection of repose and of unconscious grace. Her musings, too, were in accordance with the peaceful atmosphere. She was in a halcyon mood, troubled by no thought of evil, desiring and fearing no change; simply feeling that existence, in the abstract, was a very pleasant and lovely possession; or if a disturbing thought, or a wish for change, crossed her mind, it was the thought of her mother's ill health, and the wish that she knew how to soothe away her pain and depression, and to chime in more helpfully with all her nervous fancies. As a whole, her thoughts were no less bright and peaceful than they might have been on a like beautiful summer's day eight years before. And if she had mused on the outward

changes that had taken place in the parish of Grantham, during those eight years, she would have found little to disturb her peace of mind. Sir John and Lady Grantham were kind as ever, and a slight increase of grey amidst the hairs on their heads did not destroy the geniality of their appearance. A few deaths and marriages had taken place in the village. The rector was easy-going, good-humoured, and broad-chested as formerly. Old Gilling had become more feeble, but was as fond of muttering as of yore, and Margaret was still often amused by his quaint remarks, or frightened by his dark looks and strange vague hints at some guilty mystery, or unfulfilled promise, which was weighing heavily upon his mind.

Alice Craycroft was still unmarried, and, moreover, frequently avowed with a gentle sigh, that it was her firm intention to lead a life of single blessedness. Her true hopes and fears on this subject were kept religiously to herself. Sometimes, to quote her own expressions in soliloquy, she was "consumed by a burning jealousy!" Sometimes she was

“wafted high on the wings of hopeful love!” She frequently visited old Gillings’ cottage, tried to be intimate with Margaret, and succeeded in being so with the lady’s-maid. She kept up a tolerably brisk correspondence with Mr. Grantham, gleaning for him all the information she could with reference to Margaret’s many admirers, relating incidents connected with her experiences when out visiting in town, or elsewhere, and even transcribing scraps out of letters which Margaret supposed to have been seen by no eyes but her own, and perhaps her mother’s, and innocently imagined to be possessed of no interest to anyone else connected with the neighbourhood. The tender correspondent, however, always concluded with a prayer that Mr. Grantham would keep up his spirits, for she was “sure, quite sure,” in spite of appearances, that “dear Margaret” was “true at heart,” and could not fail to love him as he deserved to be loved, in time!

Miles Grantham still paid frequent visits to the Hall, and had not relinquished his

purpose of winning Margaret Willoughby's hand. But Margaret bore the tedium of his presence and of his attentions with greater equanimity than formerly. She knew better how to hold her own, and told herself that it was wiser to let things take their course, and weary themselves to death, than to fret and fume and fuss at the tiresome eccentricities of a provoking and benighted world.

On this particular afternoon, however, she was not so much as troubled by a passing thought of an uncongenial outer world, or of the differences of opinion entertained, on certain subjects, by herself and her elders. She was giving herself up completely to the luxury of undisturbed repose, rejoicing in the knowledge that no callers were likely to invade the premises, because all Darlingster was engaged to a grand afternoon party; and other neighbours, even including the Granthams, were absent from home.

A green-backed volume of poetry lay on the grass by her side. She idly turned its

pages, wondering, though with placid contentment, how soon her mother would fulfil her promise to come out of doors, for the agreed-upon reading of Tennyson.

Poor Margaret! More things than were dreamed of in her pleasant summer day's philosophy were already being discussed as known facts by the much excited gossips of Darlingster. All Darlingster knew what the four o'clock train had brought fourth in the shape of a visitor for The Cottage! All Darlingster knew the meaning of the carriage-wheels which were rolling with due speed along the high road from Darlingster to Grantham. And while Margaret was resting in blissful forgetfulness that change or disturbance could find a place on the earth, the Darlingster mind was travelling with amazing rapidity over the numberless changes and counter-changes which would doubtless be brought about by the present brilliant chance which had turned up trumps for the lucky Margaret Willoughby!

It was not long, however, before the low songs of contentment which were making

melody in her heart, were interrupted by the sound of those very carriage-wheels which had been the cause of so much interest and excitement to her neighbours at Darlingster. A loud ringing at the door-bell quickly followed, as a climax of discomfiture.

“Who in the world can it be?” she thought. “Must I go in? or will it be only some manageable old lady, whom mamma can conveniently entertain without my aid? Who *can* it be? The carriage has gone, and mamma has come down, and, oh, dear, dear, she is beckoning to me, and I suppose I must go! Bother the person!”

The “person” proved to be a pleasant visitor, much liked by Margaret herself. But there was a flutter of suppressed excitement in Mrs. Willoughby’s voice, and a simpering smile on her face, while she said,—

“Margaret, my love, Lord Mark Denham is here,” which gave Margaret the sensation of having been mentally rubbed the wrong way, and made her feel that, in spite of her regard for Lord Mark, his visit would be very hateful to her. Her irritation evapor-

ated when she entered the sunshiny presence, and listened to the genial talk; but returned again and again throughout the evening. For she could not divest herself of the consciousness that her mother's eyes were following all her movements, with an expression of mingled triumph and anxiety. And every word that Mrs. Willoughby spoke seemed to her like the bubbling of a concoction of fear and exultation that was simmering within the maternal mind.

But try as she would, she could not visit her ill-humour on the kind friend who was so gentle in his manner towards her. He found her unaffectedly gracious, naïve, and sweet, as usual, and his sanguine mind almost fancied, now and again, that it detected an added softness in her looks and tones. So that the hopes which her mild rebuffs had kept at bay for so long, were now determined to have their way, and obtain, without farther delay, their doom of either life or death. He had come in obedience to frequent reminders that he would be always welcome, had modestly made as though he were “passing

that way, and had looked in for half an hour," but had accepted the invitation to remain the night without much urging. And his doubtful reply to Mrs. Willoughby's hope that his visit would be prolonged for as much time as he could spare was followed by a glance at Margaret, which was not lost upon her mother.

The evening was agreeable. But when, at its close, Margaret went up to her room, all her peace of mind and all her mirth had vanished far away. For at a sudden touch, at the careless mention of a name, of an accidental, unimportant meeting, longings which had before been resting in quiet slumber had instantaneously been recalled to wakefulness, life, and activity ! In the last few minutes of standing up talk,—the lingering words on a favourite artist, and a picture in the Royal Academy Exhibition of the season,—Lord Mark Denham had mentioned a meeting with an old acquaintance of his, "Charles Meredith, a connoisseur in pictures," and had spoken of a striking observation made by him, and his wish that a certain

discussion could have been continued, adding, "But that restless being, Meredith, was obliged to be off to some scientific meeting, and was flying out of town, and over the world, on wings of lightning, as usual!"

With her head half averted, and with a smile that had hardly hidden a sudden look of fatigue, Margaret had bidden Lord Mark good-night, and followed Mrs. Willoughby up to bed. And then, unavailing regrets, dark thoughts, the feeling that all things in the world were at cross purposes, and that certain evil beings of contrariety were permitted to work their mischievous deeds according to their own will, came over her with the force of past days. This year was the first, for several years, on which she and her mother had not gone up to town, for some part of the season. It had been her own desire not to go; but had they gone, had they, as on other occasions, been Lord Mark Denham's companions at the Royal Academy, who could say what might not have happened? At least, she might have dis-

covered if he were happy and satisfied without her !

So poor Lord Mark had few of Margaret's thoughts that night, and Mrs. Willoughby's fabric of hopes was frail as it appeared fair and brilliant.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT eleven o'clock the next morning the catastrophe took place. By one o'clock the guest had departed. And Margaret, sad, thoughtful, anxious, with pale and tear-stained cheeks, was seated near the drawing-room window, alone. Her chin rested in her hand, and she was very still; except that at any fancied sound in the passages, or on the stair-case, she turned her head for an instant, in fear lest the dreaded moment of her mother's coming down should be at hand. She was determined that, if possible, she would keep Lord Mark Denham's proposal, and her own rejection of him, a secret between herself and him. But it would take a little time to regain her composure, and to prepare herself to make his apologies in a sufficiently natural and nonchalant manner.

“There she is !” she exclaimed, at length. And hastily rising from her chair, she hurried across the room to look at herself in the glass over the fire-place, rubbed her cheeks, swept away the last remnant of a tear, smiled, grinned, and finally turned a beaming face upon her mother, as she entered the room.

“Well, my love,” said Mrs. Willoughby, languidly, but with a cheerful smile, “what have you been about this morning? I am very sorry I was unable to be down sooner ; but I have no doubt you have got on very well without me. What have you done with Lord Mark? I expected to find you out of doors, lionizing him over the grounds.”

“Oh, he left all sorts of messages and apologies for you, mother dear,” answered Margaret, speaking very quickly, whilst her cheeks became crimson; “but he was obliged to go this morning. He found he could not stay any longer.”

Mrs. Willoughby looked aghast, and stood for a moment silent, as though petrified by horror and astonishment.

“Gone, Margaret! What do you mean? Speak,—explain yourself! Is this all a foolish joke of yours? Speak, can’t you, child? How can Lord Mark have gone, when he promised to stay,—when——”

“You know, mother, he spoke doubtfully; he was not sure that he should be able to remain,” interrupted Margaret, quailing beneath her mother’s withering glance, and, despite all her efforts, blushing more furiously than ever.

“Margaret, you cannot deceive me,” answered her mother. “I see,—I understand now; he has proposed to you, and you have refused him! And yet,—no, it is impossible! You cannot have been such a cruel, heartless flirt! After all the encouragement you have given him, after your conduct last night! It is impossible, Margaret!—tell me that it is impossible!—tell me what it all means!

“It means, mother, darling,” cried Margaret, finding herself driven into a corner,—“it means that I love you too dearly ever to leave you. It means that I want to stay

with you always, if you will only let me, and to be a very happy old maid ! ”

“ It means rather, Margaret,” replied her mother, in a slowly reproachful tone, “ that you are bent upon displeasing me in every possible way, and care for nothing so that you may gratify your own vanity and pleasure ! No matter to you how many hearts you trample under your feet ! ”

“ Mother ! ” exclaimed Margaret, her lips curling contemptuously, in spite of herself, while a struggle went on within her, to repress either laughter or weeping, or both. Her sense of the ludicrous was tickled, but her mother’s absurd exaggeration, misapprehension, and injustice, at the same time, pained her to the quick. “ Mother,” she continued, “ Lord Mark understands me better than you do. He does not consider me a heartless flirt. He knows that I like him very, very, much, but cannot love him as a man ought to be loved by his wife ! Oh, mother dear, if you would only forgive me, as he does ! ” And kneeling down, she leaned her head upon her mother’s lap,

longing to sob her heart out there, as she had done, oftentimes, when a little child. But Mrs. Willoughby did not respond to her caressing tone.

Margaret," she said, "this is all very well; but I wish you would remember that 'to obey is better than sacrifice,' that—" but before her mother could proceed farther, Margaret had jumped up to her feet again, and the rising tears were driven back to their fountain, while, with a gay laugh, she said,—

"But, dear mother, you know that I am not offering to make any sacrifice! And you know that I am always ready to obey you in every *possible* way!"

"You have shown your obedience strangely, Margaret," it seems to me," returned Mrs. Willoughby, in a freezing tone. "You have thwarted all my wishes,—you have disappointed all my hopes! And when I venture to reprove you, in the gentlest tone, you only stand and laugh at me! When you have driven your mother into her grave, perhaps you will be sorry for your undutiful conduct!"

Poor Margaret! She knew by heart her mother's favourite suggestions about an early grave, and had been threatened with remorseful orphanage so many times that the threat might well-nigh have lost something of its effect. But despite the vanity and frequency of repetition, her heart and conscience regularly rose to the bait thrown out to them, and now, looking remorsefully into her mother's pale face and heavy aching eyes,

"Mother dear," she said, "forgive me, I did not mean to laugh. Indeed, I am very, very unhappy; but what can I do?"

"Try to conquer your spirit of contradiction, my love; it is all I ask. You have disappointed me about poor Miles,—and I am sure it goes to one's heart to see the mere shadow that the poor fellow has become!—You have disappointed me about Sir Thomas Fletcher,—and now, when I thought your happiness was sure, when I thought that you had found all that heart could desire, you have disappointed me again! So delightful, so attractive, so good,

so genial!—so— Margaret, I thought that even you could find nothing to complain of in Lord Mark Denham, and I was prepared to overlook your want of appreciation of poor Miles Grantham, who, certainly, poor fellow, is not so charming or elegant as Lord Mark,—and now, as I say, you have cruelly, cruelly disappointed me once more. Surely it can only be a spirit of contradiction that actuates you! You confess you like him! Think better of it, Margaret. Tell me,—why will you not marry him? ”

“If I liked and admired him less, if I thought him less noble and good, I should think it less utterly out of the question that I could be brought to agree to marry him!” answered Margaret, quickly.

“What an extraordinary girl you are!” answered her mother, peevishly. “Am I not right in calling you perverse? You won’t marry Miles because you hate him, and you won’t marry Lord Mark because you like him. This seems to be all the rhyme or reason that is to be got out of you!”

“I should not consider myself so entirely base if I married Miles, whom I hate, as I should if I married Lord Mark, whom I honour, but whom I cannot love as he deserves to be loved by his wife! Now, mother, do you understand what I mean?” said Margaret.

“It is not always the noblest and the best upon whom we bestow our affections! We often love the faulty man the better for all his many failings!” returned Mrs. Willoughby, bringing her somewhat irrelevant answer out of a hoard of book-sayings which she kept somewhere locked up in the corner of her memory. A sudden notion had entered her head,—a sudden hope. She remembered to have read some novel in which a girl was represented as having veiled her affection for her lover under hatred, or even to have made herself believe that she hated the man whom, in heart, she loved with deep affection. Could this be the state of the case with Margaret’s feelings for Miles? Could Lord Mark’s proposal have revealed to her the fact that she really

loved Miles, and could marry no one else? It must be so! Yes, the more she thought of it, the more convinced she felt that so it must be! And if a doubt crossed her mind, it was quickly crushed, for that so it *should* be she was firmly resolved. If Margaret had not the taste to return the love of the fascinating young noblemen and baronets who lost their hearts to her, and danced attendance upon her season after season in London, she should marry her pretended pet aversion, the excellent young man who had been devoted to her all her life, and who, after all, was as eligible as any of her more brilliant admirers. It would be much more homelike, much less trouble; it had been her first wish, and should be her last. The Hall and The Cottage being so close, everything being so comfortable and luxurious, made the plan a very pleasant one to fall back upon. And Mrs. Willoughby felt sure that it must have been ordered especially, in consideration of her own delicate health. But she was determined to keep her thoughts to herself, and Mar-

garet could not make her out at all, that day. She had become so preternaturally amiable all of a sudden, and was so restless and flighty in her manner, one minute, and so dully and languidly reflective the next, that her daughter remembered with horror the caution that Mr. Thomas had given her years before, and began almost to fear that disappointment and worry were seriously affecting her mother's mind. She reproached herself remorsefully with doing nothing to please her, and set about trying to soothe and console her in every possible way she could think of. When, with a sidelong glance at Margaret, Mrs. Willoughby wondered how the Granthams were getting on, when they were coming back, and whether Miles would keep to his intention of going North for the 12th of August, or would find himself irresistibly drawn southwards, Margaret entered into her humour, sympathised with her wonderings, and hoped that she would not be much longer without the companionship of Lady Grantham. In the evening, though she complained that her

head ached furiously, Mrs. Willoughby was animated and excited. At night Margaret was continually awakened by moans, and mutterings, and soliloquy; and presently she awoke with a start, to find the room lighted, and Mrs. Willoughby in the act of seating herself to her writing-table, with pen, ink, and paper, in readiness for correspondence.

“Mother dear, what is the matter?” cried Margaret, in great horror; “what are you up for at this time of night? Is it anything that I can do for you? Do get into bed again, or you’ll be half dead all to-morrow.”

“My dear,” returned her mother, in a reassuring tone of voice, “go to sleep and leave me alone. I can’t rest myself for thinking of poor Lord Mark’s grief, and every thought brings a fresh throb of agony to my poor head. So I am trying to distract my mind by writing one of the many letters that my poor health has prevented my writing sooner. I owe dear Lady Grantham a letter, and she will be interested in hearing our news.”

“All right, mother, only don’t be long, there’s a darling.”

But Mrs. Willoughby was very long. In a lengthy and roundabout way she gave her reasons for believing that Margaret was not so indifferent to Miles as had hitherto been supposed, and hinted that it would be well for him not to put off too long returning to the assault of the sensitive child’s heart!’

And amidst uncomfortable sleepings and wakings, Margaret heard the continuous scritch-scratch of her mother’s pen until dawn, when she lay down again, to remain a useless being through the hours of daylight.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARGARET'S predictions had been fulfilled. Mrs. Willoughby was much the worse for her midnight exertions, and during that day, and many other days, she caused her daughter great anxiety. Agitations of various sorts had their own way with her weak mind and uncontrolled nervous system; and more than once Jane, the maid, frightened poor Margaret nearly out of her wits by coming in with a gloomy face and an alarming manner, to say,—

“Missis seems quite ‘hoff her head’ again, Miss Margaret; I don’t think we shall keep her here much longer, if she goes on having so many things to worry her. She’ll be going out like the snuff of a candle, Miss Margaret, before you know where you are, and them as has worried her won’t be able to bring her back again.”

“Do you think she is going to have one of those horrid attacks of fever, Jane?” asked Margaret. “I wish Mr. Thomas was at home. We must send for some one.”

“There, no doctors can save missis from being worried into her grave, and she is set against seeing the strange doctor, who acted so cruel to her the day he came in to see cook, and she spoke to him, with her poor eyes half shut with pain. She won’t see him, so it ain’t no use your troubling yourself to send for him, Miss Margaret.”

Jane was right. Mrs. Willoughby refused, absolutely, to see Mr. Thomas’ substitute when he came. She had taken an aversion from him, and declared that he was a man of no sympathy, and could not understand her peculiar constitution and sensitive temperament. No one could, she thought, now that he was away, but that usually much-abused and long-suffering person, Mr. Thomas! In short, Mrs. Willoughby seemed to be bent, at present, on martyring herself. Margaret could do nothing with her, and was getting quite into despair, when relief came in the

shape of a letter from Lady Grantham, with the intelligence that she and Sir John were about to return to Grantham immediately, and she thought it more than probable that their nephew Miles would accompany them. It mattered little to Margaret, now, whether he came or not. The nuisance of his presence would not hurt her, and she hailed gladly the prospect of any diversion which might act as a remedy for Mrs. Willoughby's diseased state of nerves.

"Oh, Lady Grantham, I am so glad to see you!" cried Margaret, when Lady Grantham appeared at The Cottage, on the morning after her arrival at home. "Mamma is dreadfully ill. She has been hysterical nearly all the morning, but it will do her good to see you."

"I will go up to her, my dear. I'll find the way. Don't come with me," replied Lady Grantham, first with an air of concern, and then with the most beaming of meaning smiles. "Dear Miles is just outside the door," she added. "I could not make him come in, he was afraid of intruding. You

know what a shy and sensitive creature he is, my darling! You can do what you like about him, but I said I would tell you."

"All right, Lady Grantham," returned Margaret, without responding to her friend's cheerful manner, while, to herself, she sighed out her favourite and oft-repeated pun, "Oh, that he were miles away!"

"May I come in, Margaret?" called a plaintive voice from the hall-door.

"By all means," replied Margaret, with cold civility. "How do you do, Miles?"

He had been almost prepared for her throwing herself into his arms, and felt somewhat rebuffed by her chilly manner and mere touch of the hand.

"Shy, perhaps, or hurt with me,—thinks I am making up to others," he reflected, reassuringly, adding aloud, "It seems very long since I saw you, dear Margaret."

Margaret's only response was a look of amazement at his daring to use a term of endearment towards her.

"May I not hope that the time has also seemed the least bit long to you, Mar-

garet?" he went on, with a timid glance from under his eyelids.

"So long that,—forgive me, but I almost forget when last we met," she replied, with a laugh.

"'Forget!' Oh, Margaret, I thought,—I hoped,— Margaret, are you angry with me still?"

"Angry? Angry—what about?" replied Margaret, brusquely. "Please, we don't want any more nonsense to-day, Miles." Then, altering her tone to one of common-place unconcern, "I had no idea," she said, "that you were thinking of coming down here this August. I fancied that you were on your way to Scotland for the twelfth?"

"I—I—I heard something that made me change my mind. I hoped—I thought— Oh don't tell me that my hopes are to be disappointed again! It would kill me, Margaret! it would kill me! Oh, Margaret, have you been deceiving us all again? Was it not true what I heard?—that—that—that you were learning to love me a little?—that—that I might hope at last——"

Sheer astonishment had kept Margaret dumb while he spoke, but as he approached her, and, kneeling down, prepared to take her hand, and raise it to his lips, in what he conceived to be the most approved fashion, she jumped up from her chair, and, drawing quickly back from him, said,—

“What you mean by all this I have not the slightest conception, Miles. It appears to me that you are labouring under some sort of extraordinary hallucination, and the sooner you free yourself from it the better. I assure you your hopes, as you are pleased to express yourself, are entirely deceptive!”

“Then my aunt and all the rest have lied to me,” said Miles, suddenly throwing off all softness of manner, rising hastily from the lowly position which he had assumed, and striding towards the door. “And you, Margaret, *you*—” He left her to complete the sentence for herself, and was off like a shot.

A sense of the ludicrous, for the moment, overcame all else in Margaret’s mind, and her excitement found relief in an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

In this state she was found by Lady Grantham, who had hastened down to learn the meaning of the banging of the front door, which had brought forth a complaining "Oh!" from Mrs. Willoughby, and had occasioned all manner of painful contortions of her face.

The sight of Lady Grantham sobered Margaret in a moment. "Is anything the matter?" she asked, quickly. Is mamma—"

"I find your mother exceedingly changed, Margaret," replied Lady Grantham, severely. "I think her much worse, and I do not wonder at it. She has had to go through a great deal, poor dear. I have come down for her, to see what the noise was?"

"Noise? Was there a noise, Lady Grantham?"

"Who slammed the door in that thoughtless manner?" returned Lady Grantham.

"Is Miles gone already? I thought you would have had much to say to each other."

"Well,—no,—not very much. That is to say, he went off in a great hurry, and I am afraid he must, in his haste, have been guilty

of slamming the door. I wish he had not, because of poor mamma's head."

"Why did he go away in such a hurry?" asked Lady Grantham, fixing her eyes on Margaret, in a manner that seemed to say, "I am not going to let you off, so you need not think it." "It is all very well for you to pretend that nothing of importance has happened. You know better, and I know better. Margaret, you are killing your mother! I am quite shocked at the change I find in her."

"I will go to mamma," said Margaret, sadly. "Please excuse me, Lady Grantham."

"I promised to return to her," replied Lady Grantham, hastily, passing Margaret, and moving towards the stair-case. "She is waiting to know the result of Miles' interview with you, and if it is disappointing, I will soothe her to the best of my power. Tell me, Margaret——"

"Interview!" interrupted Margaret, in a tone of amazed impatience. "Interview! Did she know that he was coming? Did she expect anything? Please explain what it all means, Lady Grantham?"

“ I think it is you whose conduct needs explanation, my dear,” said Lady Grantham. “ You gave your mamma to understand that you had discovered your mistake, that you had found out the worth of Miles’ heart at last.”

“ My dear Lady Grantham, you must be dreaming ! ” cried Margaret, her tone betraying an almost equal amount of astonishment and dismay. “ What could I have said that mamma could so have misunderstood ! ”

“ The wonder would be if the moods of so capricious a young lady were always comprehended, my dear, rather than that they should be continually misunderstood,” returned Lady Grantham, in a displeased tone of voice. “ But so long as you have your own way, Margaret, I believe you care little what misery you cause to others ! ”

Margaret knew that the words were unjust, and yet they struck home to her heart, and gave it a sharp pang, and while her companion proceeded to Mrs. Willoughby’s room, she remained pondering over them, at the bottom of the stair-case.

“After all,” she said to herself,—“after all, perhaps she may be right. For whom do I live? Who but I myself would suffer if I were to sacrifice myself, and do what she wants? Would *he* care? Have I any right to suppose that, after all these years, he still thinks of me? And if he does not, is it not mere sentimental selfish nonsense my going on dreaming of that happy and sorrowful long-past time? If I cannot make any one else happy, by things coming right, why may I not as well make myself unhappy to please mamma? It will be doing something. It will bring all this worry to an end, and we should have peace for a little while: I should of course be miserable, but what does that signify? What would be better than misery for mamma’s sake? But would it be wicked, as I hate him so?”

She was so in love with the notion of self-sacrifice that she did not stay to receive an answer to her mental query, but quickly went on with her silent parley,—

“It would be to save mamma, and though I could never learn to like him, I would make

him a dutiful wife for her sake. And if she gets well and is happy, will it not be worth while for me to be miserable? ”

With her heart and mind thus full of thought and feeling, she went into her mother's room, where she found Mrs. Willoughby in violent hysterics, Lady Grantham bending soothingly over her, and Jane standing at the bottom of the bed, looking on hopelessly, with the knowledge that a dash of cold water would be more to the purpose than sympathising words.

“ Oh, that Mr. Thomas were here! For he knows how to soothe mamma's nerves without kneeling down to worship them, like the rest of the world! ” thought Margaret, whose self-sacrificing resolve seemed suddenly to have revealed to her something of the weakness and selfishness of her mother's character; and who, with the sense of all that she was intending to give up for her mother's sake, felt doubly irritated by the scene upon which she had entered.

“ Jane, you need not stay, ” she said to the lady's-maid, and there was something in Margaret's manner that seemed to enforce

obedience. Then, armed with *eau-de-cologne* and cold water, she took up her station at the side of the bed, opposite to that at which Lady Grantham stood, and firmly, though gently, proceeded to conquer the attack. But though the cure had been effected, Mrs. Willoughby shrank away from her daughter, and with feeble moans, which, in spite of herself, made Margaret very cross, put out her hands to Lady Grantham, and looked imploringly towards her.

“I won’t leave you, my dear,” said her sympathising friend, softly, while she shot forth a reproachful glance at Margaret.

“Mother, dear, don’t you think you had better try to go to sleep now?” said Margaret, laying her hand softly on Mrs. Willoughby’s forehead. And it seemed as if she had suddenly gained some strange ascendancy over others. Mrs. Willoughby ceased her moaning, and closed her eyes, and composed her face, and Lady Grantham, seeing there was no longer any part for her to perform, with a cold farewell to Margaret, took her leave; and remembering a like scene

of years ago, it seemed to Margaret as if a bad dream had come to life in reality.

But her feelings were very different, as she now sat and ruminated, while her mother slept, from what they had been in that same room seven years before. Then a fair dream-land had cast its spells around her. Now she was bidding farewell to happy dreams, and strengthening her self-sacrificing resolution, and only arranging her plans so as to leave herself a faint loop-hole of hope for the future.

“Mother,” she said, presently, when her mother awakened from her doze, “I want to say something to you. Is your head well enough to bear talking?”

“Margaret!” cried Mrs. Willoughby, sitting up, and speaking in a querulous tone, which grew louder and shriller as she went on,—“Margaret, your cruel, undutiful conduct is killing me. I don’t want to hear any more about it. Let me die in peace; you won’t have me to disturb you much longer!” Then lying down with a martyr-like expression of countenance, she languidly closed her eyes.

“Mother,” said Margaret, “do you still wish that I should marry Miles Grantham?”

Mrs. Willoughby opened her eyes and looked up briskly.

“You know my wishes, Margaret,” she replied. “Why do you ask? Are you going to deceive me with false promises again?”

“Have I deceived you mother?” said Margaret, quietly,—“well, I will not deceive you again. Listen, mother! If, in spite of all that I have said, he still wishes it, and if you and his people wish it, I will consent to marry Miles on condition that he keeps away from me for a twelvemonth, and that if anything should occur during that time to alter your mind and mine, or to change his feelings towards me, the engagement shall be considered at an end.”

“My child, my darling!” exclaimed Mrs. Willoughby, rapturously. “I knew it,—I knew it! I was sure that in your heart you loved him! You——”

“But I don’t love him, mother,” put in Margaret. “If I marry him, it will be solely to please you.”

“You will never regret it! You will be happy! He will have the best of wives! We shall all be happy! You little know how thankful and glad you have made me, my child.”

This was delightful! For a moment, Margaret almost forgot everything else in the pleasure of being caressed and petted by her mother, whom she loved as fondly as if she had been the wisest and most unselfish of women.

“Now, mother dear,” she said, presently, “I shall leave you to rest.”

“No, I am quite rested; I am ready to get up,” answered Mrs. Willoughby.

How delightful, to be able to charm away pain and languor by humouring an invalid’s wishes, and letting her have her own way! Margaret found her immediate reward to be exceedingly satisfactory.

Early in the afternoon Mrs. Willoughby and Lady Grantham held another private conference; which was followed by another “lovers’ interview,” to use Lady Grantham’s expression; and in the evening a friendly

meeting took place at The Cottage, for rejoicing over the happy arrangement that had been entered into. It was the merriest evening possible, and Margaret herself was the merriest of the party. Who, to look at her radiant face, and listen to her joyous laugh, could have doubted that she was happy? Even she herself, in her excitement, began to think that the charms of martyrdom surpassed all other charms to be experienced on earth!

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